

PLANET STORIES



SUMMER
1944

20c

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS
—THE UNIVERSE OF FUTURE CENTURIES

TERROR OUT OF SPACE

ALONG THE AEON-OLD HIGHROAD
SLITHERED A DEVOURING HORDE

Novels by **LEIGH BRACKETT**

MORGUE SHIP

by **RAY BRADBURY**

by **PHILIP WELLMAN**



Letter to a P.O.W.

WILL YOU WRITE a letter to a Prisoner of War . . . tonight?

Perhaps he was left behind when Bataan fell. Perhaps he had to bail out over Germany. Anyway, he's an American, and he hasn't had a letter in a long, long time.

And when you sit down to write, tell *him* why you didn't buy your share of War Bonds last pay day—if you didn't.

"Dear Joe," you might say, "the old topcoat was getting kind of threadbare, so I . . ."

No, cross it out. Joe might not understand about the topcoat, especially if

he's shivering in a damp Japanese cell.

Let's try again. "Dear Joe, I've been working pretty hard and haven't had a vacation in over a year, so . . ."

Better cross that out, too. They don't ever get vacations where Joe's staying.

Well, what are you waiting for? Go ahead, write the letter to Joe. Try to write it, anyhow.

But if somehow you find you can't, will you do this? Will you up the amount you're putting into your Payroll Savings Plan—so that you'll be buying your share of War Bonds from here on in?

FICTION HOUSE, INC.

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PLANET STORIES



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TWO GRIPPING NOVELS OF OTHER PLANETS

MINIONS OF THE CRYSTAL SPHERE Albert DePina 2

Revolt was brewing in the jewel-world of Plastica, for the blazing hate of millions of slaves was a funeral pyre for the brutal masters that could not be checked. And fanning that flame to raging life was a slender girl and Vyril Guerlan—the Ruler who had become a slave.

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Minions of the Crystal Sphere

By ALBERT DE PINA

Like a monster flashing jewel, *Plastica* hovered over Neptune. And burning at its heart like the malignant sparkle of a gem was the blazing hate of millions of slaves, ready to flare into raging battle at the ringing tocsin of Vyril Guerlan, the man without a country.

Illustration by ELIAS

THE vast globe of transparent plastic, infinitely stronger than the most powerful columbium steel, hung suspended in space, ablaze in brilliant pyrotechnics of light. And as cold and impersonal as the laws of the empire it ruled.

Within it was the City of the Inner Circle. Patterned after the City of Plastica itself, it rose within the globe in graduated tiers, but unlike Plastica, there were no graduations of caste—they were all Protectors, these scientists of the Inner Circle,

and above them ruled the legendary figure of *His Benevolence*, the "Protector in Chief."

Six thousand feet below, the turbulent ocean tossed restlessly as if resentful of the awful pressure of the stupendous anti-gravity beams that kept the glittering sphere in space—sacred, inviolate, invulnerable. Above the ocean's shoreline, set amidst low hills, rose Plastica, entirely enclosed in a shell of the same transparent plastic, and rising tier on tier—each one a small



L. & L. S.

world unto itself, and each barred from communication with other tiers. Here the millions toiled and loved and died . . . and entered the portals of Blessed Sleep.

In the vast reaches of Neptune, only this continent—Adamic, was livable, thanks to immense volcanic valleys where constant volcanic activity of titanic proportions maintained a temperate atmosphere in contrast to the frigid, desolate continents to the north and west. And dotting the valley of *Plastica* like transparent beehives, the twelve jewels of the diadem—twelve cities where five million human beings dwelt in each, formed the empire of sixty million descendants of the original immigrants who chose to follow the Council in their flight from Venus.

There was no other sign of man, except among the virgin forests of the volcanic valleys, where the Irreconcilables who fled the rigid laws of the Protectors, carried on a precarious existence, assailed by fierce wild beasts of prey, and hunted for sport with lances and long-swords by the members of the Inner Circle, and the Scientists of the first order. Burdened by the awful gravity of the great planet, and without adequate arms to defend themselves, they were doomed quarry.

Within the capital, *Plastica*, and in each of the twelve cities, each individual life had a definite pattern known only to the members of the Inner Circle. Any deviation from that pattern brought instant retribution. There was no appeal, for each judgment was based on cold, inexorable law. Ever since the great exodus from Earth, when the original Council had fled Terra, and forced colonies on Mars and Venus, and later after their disastrous war with Europa, the Council itself had been given the alternative of leaving the inner planets or being executed, the members of the Council had colonized Neptune with millions who unable to live without the "controls" had chosen to accompany them into space. As the centuries passed and a new ruler of the Council had been elected, changes had occurred in the laws, methods had been perfected, until now, all Neptune was ruled by the City in the Flaming Sphere, and to the millions in *Plastica* and the other great cities, the Protectors (as they now styled themselves), had become legendary figures. The Law was

supreme. And behind the Law, was the "Blessed Sleep."

IN THE fabulous hall of the palace, where the reeling torches in relief threw faces of ink and of gold, there was a sudden silence as an unearthly voice rose limpid, supernally lovely, in a single ululating note. It was as if a gargoyle were singing with the voice of an angel.

But the bizarre assemblage of jaded, pleasure-sated "Protectors" of the *Inner Circle* had no eyes for the cadaverous Minister of Justice, whose distorted features seemed uglier as he directed a stream of modulated notes upward toward the gigantic doors at the top of jewelled stairs. All eyes peering through the slits of black and golden masks that completely hid their faces, were directed at the great red doors, shining like gigantic, square cut rubies under the primitive light of resinous torches. Every detail of the masquerade was perfection itself, copying faithfully the conditions of primitive ages thousands of years past. The magnificent costumes of the guests harked back to pirates and slave-dealers, to vanished kings and oriental potentates. Back to an era when humanity was young, as if these scientists who had the command of miracles at their fingertips, had wearied of their scientific perfection.

Bejamel, Minister of Justice, had conceived the idea, and His Benevolence had approved. From the current "favorite" of His Benevolence, to the newest neophyte of the Inner Circle, the Masquerade had immediately become a command performance.

Only one thing they had no need to imitate, one thing that harked back to the darkest annals of Terra and surpassed anything that Planet had ever known—their utterly ruthless intrigues for the favor of His Benevolence. Assassinations were a commonplace, besides it provided a constant incentive to the Scientists of the First Order, for from them were chosen the fortunate ones who filled the vacancies of the Inner Circle.

The audience gave a vast sigh, like a susurrating breeze, as the ponderous doors began to open under the exact tonal vibration of Bejamel's voice, for Bejamel, Minister of State, was the only one who could open those doors, aside from the "Pro-

lector in Chief" himself. Within the inner chamber nothing was discernible as the doors opened—nothing but a vast radiance intolerable to their eyes. As if a command had been given, all of them kneeled with bowed heads. At last, Bejamel's ululating chant ceased and when they looked again, the jewelled door had closed, but on the dais at the top of the stairs immediately above them reclined a figure—a monstrous figure of man, whose sharp, pale-yellow eyes gazed at them with bored contempt from amid folds of bulging flesh.

"Benevolence!" The roar of thousands of voices rose in servile tribute, and left hands were flung upwards, fingers extended in salute. His Benevolence looked them over with cold, cruel eyes that seemed to miss no detail, and a little smile extended the bulbous lips. Languidly he waved a massive hand to the masqueraders, noting that none had achieved the bejewelled opulence of his Mandarin's costume, and instantly the revelry burst into tumult. The corps of exquisite dancers until now frozen in motionless attitudes, began a series of provocative movements, while barbaric drums and percussion instruments wove a theme of madness and desire. Over all, the shrill *passionata* of the reeds and strings wringed insistently to combine in a diabolic pattern that plucked at raw nerves and bared hidden jealousies and hates and bared the instincts of the jungle, red in tooth and claw.

A group of dancers weaving and undulating in the suggestive rhythms of the Venusian "*Vuda*" passed like an uncoiling serpent before the august dais and burst into bacchanalian frenzy before the sardonic yellow eyes of His Benevolence. The fantastic splendor of the scene was heightened by the young, supple bodies of the most beautiful girls in the empire, the Virgins of the Sacred Flame, chosen yearly for that sacred trust.

"WELL," an impassive voice inquired of a tall, dark-haired *guest* who stood in the side-lines, stiff and uncertain, his conventional black mask too small to hide the firm, square-cut mouth, his blue-black mane of shoulder-length hair betraying him as a newcomer lacking as it did the curled and perfumed artistry of the other guests.

"I suppose it's superfluous to ask your reactions to your first visit to the mysteries of our City." The faint laughter that accompanied the words brought a flush to the cheeks of the newcomer, fortunately covered by the mask.

"How did you know I was a newcomer?" The youth inquired in turn.

"Simple," the cold, impassive voice replied. "You have no jewels save that ring of a scientist of the First Order you're trying to conceal. Your costume's far too simple. . . . When do you begin your probationary period for the Inner Circle?" The speaker was below medium height, slender as a sheathed rapier, and dressed in a single garment of tight-fitting silk literally emblazoned in diamonds of the first water. His square-cut mane of red-gold hair was starred with myriad blue and red and yellow flashing stones, but the face was thoroughly hidden by the golden mask.

"Tomorrow!" The words were spoken with a vast regret. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand. . . . I hadn't expected this. Why I thought Sacred City was a heaven of achievement of . . ." he stopped as if words failed him.

"Go on!" The sexless voice had a hint of mockery in its depths now. "This is merely a preamble." He waved a marvelously slender hand in the direction of the revellers. "Later . . . but then, I always manage to slip away before the real feast commences. If you wish, you may come with me."

"But who are you? I might as well tell you who am I," the youth began, but his unknown acquaintance waved his words aside with a gesture.

"I know who you are—scientist of the First Order Guerlan, as for me, it does not matter who I am—you will see me again . . . soon." He turned to leave.

"Wait!" Guerlan exclaimed. "Take me with you out of this . . . this welter of vice and . . ." words failed him in his disgust.

"Traitor . . . Blasphemer!" A hoarse cry of rage rose above the music and tumult. The swirling dancers split asunder as if a giant's hand had flung them back. In the center of the cleared space, Guerlan found himself facing a stocky, powerful figure of a man, costumed in the ancient garments of a Pirate, eyes gleaming

through the slits of his golden mask. In his hand he hefted a long columbium sword with bejewelled hilt. "Draw, vermin!" He taunted the dazed youth. "Draw before I spit you on my sword like a spider!"

On the dais, still reclining as he gulped superb white grapes, His Benevolence had begun to show signs of interest for the first time. The veil of boredom had left his yellow eyes, an expectant grin split his lips hungrily. Here was an unscheduled diversion of the first order.

Guerlan wore a long, thin rapier for a weapon, it had come with the costume, or he'd never have thought of wearing it—nothing like this fantastic nightmare could possibly have occurred to him. "Why did they have to choose me!" He groaned inwardly. But with a swift movement he drew the blade and stood *en garde*. He sensed dimly that it was a true weapon, flexible and needle-sharp, not a costume-toy. And once he had it in his hand, all his relentless, austere training in fencing and sword-play came flooding in his mind. It was not considered sportsmanlike to hunt Irreconcilables with atmo-pistols, only swords and spears were used—but the end was the same for the defenseless rebels.

Dimly Guerlan was aware of the dispassionate voice whispering in his ear, "Watch out for tricks . . . and win! The penalty will be far less severe."

Guerlan wondered if his unknown acquaintance of the frigid voice meant that his rebellious words had reached the awe-some figure on the dais, and that by winning he might be shown mercy. But he had no more time to think irrelevant thoughts, for with a cry of drunken fury, his accuser struck without preamble, slashing downward in a mighty blow calculated to have cloven anything in two. But Guerlan smiled contemptuously at the transparent maneuver; he merely shifted sideways and flicked his rapier, and the sword slid harmlessly along the shining columbium steel rapier. But the pseudo-pirate had no intentions of giving up the initiative, he whirled the saber over his head and again brought it down in a glancing blow that would have sheered through Guerlan, and the young scientist again parried it with such precision that the razor-sharp blade slid off singing to one side.

IT WAS a superb struggle, and His Benevolence had directed his palace minions to clear space for his unobstructed view. He now held a gigantic uncut, but polished diamond to one eye, which he alternated with an emerald and then a ruby, watching the battle through various colors. An immense golden platter of viands and fruits slowly disappeared down his capable maw.

Suddenly Guerlan closed in. His rapier flashed with vertiginous speed, flicking in and out, so rapidly that it barely seemed to touch the brawny forearm of his attacker, but when it came away it left a flowing gash from elbow to wrist. With a bellow of humiliation and rage, the pirate-costumed scientist lunged with a tremendous slash, but his sword-point speared the air and before he could recover his balance, Guerlan drove his rapier deep into the fleshy shoulder.

His attacker was silent now, an ominous rage contorted the brutal face from which he'd torn the golden mask. He had but one single idea, to kill and kill quickly. Laughter and jeering shouts rose around him. As did the acrid odor of blood mingling with the exotic fragrances that cloyed the atmosphere . . . his own blood! His reaction to the audible scorn of the other inner circle scientists was instantaneous. He came in whirling his saber until it was like a silver vortex, then he brought it down in a savage slash to sheer Guerlan's head off his shoulders. But the youth leaped back, engaging the Pirate's sword at the same time and with a strange flicking motion accomplished faster than the eye could catch, he twisted suddenly at a precise instant and sent his attacker's sword flying through the silent hall.

It was an all but forgotten, ancient Italian trick whose origins were lost. But the Scientist of the Inner Circle, sweating under his gaudy pirate's costume knew nothing about Italian fencing tricks—he only knew that one moment he'd thought to shear his opponent's head off his shoulders and the next he was disarmed. A look of sheer horror came into his blood-flecked eyes and next an uncontrollable scream escaped his lips. That sealed his doom. Guerlan saluted and made no motion to finish him. But from the fabulous dais where the jeweled stairs were like

a flowing stream of fire, a mocking, infinitely sardonic laugh chilled every scientist present in that room.

"Our unfortunate brother is afraid, he is tired, is he not Bejamel? After such an ordeal he deserves sleep . . . soothing 'Blessed Sleep!'" Again that demoniac, perversely cruel cachination that travestied laughter, while the scientist, grovelling now, babbled in a frenzy of appeals for a mercy that didn't exist. He was led screaming to a side door and then once more there was silence in the hall.

"Bring the rebel!" Once more it was the voice of His Benevolence, purring now, silky, filled with anticipatory pleasure. But Guerlan needed no one to bring him before the dreaded presence. He walked calm and erect to what he sensed would be his death. He knew that from this soulless being he could expect no justice—nothing but death. But there was to be a surprise in store for him. His Benevolence was an adept at ringing the changes of torture on a human soul, and this was a magnificent occasion. "We have heard you disapprove of us?" His Benevolence's voice was light, cheerful, there was no hint of danger in the silky tones. But Guerlan knew. That partly developed extra-sensory perception that was a part of his heritage was prenatally alert now. He was not fooled.

"I expressed a misunderstanding, Your Benevolence," Guerlan bowed and slowly took off his mask. Above the wide-spaced deep-green eyes, flashing like tourmalines, a tiny tattooed six-pointed star seemed to tremble with the pulsing of a vein.

"You see, Bejamel? I told you that 'Perceptives' would never do, yet you so persuasively sold me the idea of how useful they could be if their extra-sensory perceptive powers were developed." He sighed. "It's that genius of yours for intrigue. . . . But it has failed. We can allow no dissidents to enter the mysteries of the inner circle, Bejamel!"

"I kneel before your Benevolence," Bejamel's gargoyle features were painfully contorted as he tried to grovel. "In my zeal for service to your Magnificence I have failed, but there's always the Blessed Sleep for this blasphemer, O Symbol of Charity!" He finished ominously and

pondered what a jewel of a victim he would make.

BUT His Benevolence gave Bejamel a look of such cold, devastating evil, that he should dare to offer a solution, that the cadaverous Minister of Justice seemed to shrink, pale and desperate, against the wall of scientists who watched avidly the *mise en scène*.

"No mercy, no finesse." His Benevolence again was wearing the mask of merciful forgiveness. "No Bejamel—not the Chamber of Blessed Sleep, just . . ." and he held up two fingers weighted with jewels. Then he turned to Guerlan.

"My son!" Guerlan flinched. "Having been offered the sacred honor of entering the Inner Circle, you failed to understand your first test of the lesser mysteries . . . all this . . . this pitiful show of human frailty and weakness, this odious travesty on the sins of the flesh, was staged to test you. And you." A world of sadness seemed to darken His Benevolence's voice, "and you condemned us! Instead of seeing it as a mere test, and valuing it for what it was worth, you believed that we were such monsters of hypocrisy as to entertain such lives." He wagged his head from side to side in inexpressible disappointment and grief. I would pardon you from the depths of my heart, but The Law is inexorable—I can but soften the harshness of your retribution.

"And so, my son," he held up two fingers again, "you not only are barred from entering the sacred inner circle, but are demoted from scientist of the first, to that of the second order. There is one plastic center where a problem has not been solved. Achieve its solution and you will be promoted to your original place, and perhaps . . . perhaps as you grow older, you may again be considered for the priceless boon, the blessed destiny you have lost tonight."

A brooding sadness mantled the obese face, lending it dignity and a transitory greatness. The soft echoes of the august voice ceased, and Guerlan found himself being led by members of the Inner Circle Guard back to the atomo-plane that had brought him here from Plastica. He was too dazed to think, a vast, anguished feeling of defeat and shame filled his mind, the

words of His Benevolence whom he had dared to doubt, were etched in acid in his brain. But, deep in the recesses of his consciousness, something mocking, something not quite articulate, struggled to plant in his chaotic thoughts, the swiftly growing seeds of doubt.

Behind him, had he only been there to see and hear, a cataract of laughter had engulfed the great Hall, and His Benevolence, surrounded by his favorites and the most magnificently beautiful girls of the empire, shook in paroxysms of mocking laughter.

But Guerlan knew nothing of this. His muscles ached from the battle and his brain was awlirl. Once out in space again, he noted that a great storm was in progress.

Hurting under guard through the stormy reaches of space, he idly watched through the plane's transparent dome how lightning danced a drunken saraband. But although Guerlan strove to re-direct his thoughts, the echoes of His Benevolence's voice were like a sunset gun in his brain—final, incontestable, a sentence to the obscurity of the Second Order, and problems . . . he had mentioned a specific problem. And Guerlan remembered with chill apprehension the sentence for failure to solve problems in the second order. Three failures brought a warning, five a probation and the sixth . . . final judgment.

The upper air of the First Level, reserved for the Scientists of the First Order, had the exhilarating quality of Burgundy. As far as Guerlan's eyes could reach, the opaline and prismatic domes of the First Level's exquisite structures extended in every direction. The light was soft and caressing, thanks to the illumination and climate conditioning of the mammoth Weather Stations. A soft, lilting melody reminiscent of the ancient ballets of another age of centuries past, was like a ripple of melodic laughter, enhancing a background of inaffable peace. But Guerlan knew how illusory all this was for him. Only enough time—a few hours to arrange his affairs and move to the Second Level had been granted him. A profound pang of regret was like a dull ache in his heart.

He had been trained from childhood to be a scientist of the First Order, his mental coordinates had warranted it. So

he had never seen any other level but the First. Vaguely he had heard of that Second level where spartan simplicity was a virtue, luxury-less, where toil was constant, and thinking—a dangerous luxury, except where work-problems were concerned. And the columbium steel band around his young heart seemed to constrict more and more. Quickly he finished packing his personal possessions. Nothing else was allowed him—a sentence of demotion entailed complete personal loss.

II

"IN TWENTY-SEVEN seconds," an impassive voice vaguely reminiscent, predicted from the inter-connecting catwalk above, "the vat will burst, flooding the safety moat with acid."

The marvelous tonal quality was startling, for in its depths there was no emotional content—almost as if it were a sexless voice prophesying the most natural thing in the world.

With a swift movement that sent the muscles rippling along a Leander-like torso, Vyrl Guerlan abandoned the precision tool with which he had tackled a gigantic refractory coupling. Gleaming with perspiration, his square-cut mouth compressed into a line of fury, he gazed up at the speaker and wondered where he'd heard that voice before. Above him rose the titanic vat of processing acid, that treated the materials and converted them into gelatinous masses in the first process.

"I was a First Order Scientist, I'm now an Analyst," Guerlan said brusquely. "Nothing in my tests indicates such an accident." But the whining crescendo of the vat's machinery was threnody in major and minor warning of sudden, devastating trouble, as its originally smooth purr changed to a cacophony of sound.

"Twelve seconds!" Came the placid voice in reply. "Care to test my prediction?"

For an answer Guerlan scrambled up the hetero-plastic ladder to the upper catwalk with the agility of dread, his mane of blue-black hair tangled and dishevelled, his face white and strained.

Guerlan towered beside the fragile figure of the scientist, whose wasp-like waist and marvelously slender hands gave him

an elfin quality in comparison with Vyr!l's streamlined strength. For an instant Guerlan felt an overpowering desire to seize the delicate body in his own great hands and break it in two. But the luminous violet eyes on the abnormally lovely face, appraising him now as if he were a particularly obnoxious specimen, held him in check with their utterly calm detachment. It was then he remembered where he'd last heard those impersonal tones, that sexless voice that seemed devoid of all emotion.

"Why . . . you're the scientist of the golden mask when I was at the . . ." but a cool hand was suddenly pressed against his lips. A vague fragrance as of Venusian jasmines was in Guerlan's nostrils and before he could say any more, a livid crack appeared down the length of the vat, growing swiftly until the vat where Guerlan had been working on the defective coupling, split into two halves with a prodigious hiss, like an apple cloven in two.

A cataract of spuming acid flooded into the safety moat, while hundreds of analysts and technicians came scrambling up the opaque hetero-plastic ladders that surpassed columbium steel in tensile strength and cycle-endurance for unlike metal, there was no fatigue factor. A babel of voices rose above the broken hum of the machinery and the swirling hiss of the released acid. Intolerable fumes taxing the conditioners in the safety towers, burned the membranes of their nostrils and mouths as they gasped for air.

And, above the hum of the machinery, the growing turmoil of panic-stricken technicians and tumult of excited voices, rose the crystalline tones of the slender scientist once more:

"Vat 66 explodes in twelve minutes!"

A desperate look—the look of a trapped animal glazed Guerlan's green eyes. If this was true, it was the end for him.

"The organic acid vat! . . . But, it's impossible!" He gasped. Yet, inwardly, even as he denied the possibility, he knew with soul-wrenching dread, and the certitude of a *perceptive* that it was true.

But he didn't have time to think, to plan a solution of the problem, for already the outpouring technicians were sweeping

him onward in a desperate exodus toward the multiple conveyors that reached every section and floor of the titanic structure that was known as Plastic No. 15. Once as he was being pushed forward by the press of horrified analysts, synthetizers, selectors, graders and all the technical complement of the Second Order who actually transformed all foods, materials, minerals and in fact everything produced in Neptune, he glimpsed the calm features of the scientist he had first seen at the Feast of the Jewels in the City of the Sphere, and it seemed to him there was a hint of pity in the violet eyes.

Guerlan's face was white as *Jadite* as he roared orders in an effort to stem the maddened flood of men. He exhorted them to don their masks of crysto-plast and try to hold back the expected explosion, but no one paid any attention; it was doubtful if they even understood him in their growing horror of the dread, corrosive acid that converted organic matter into a secret formula that none but the Scientists of the Inner Circle were permitted to know anything about. They never saw the final product under the penalty of death.

AT LAST they debouched into the conveyors, and Guerlan, among a group of others, was taken to the Dispersors—platforms where the ultra-sensitive dispersal machines sensitized to the vibrations of their individual plastic wrist-band of rank, unerringly sent them to their proper levels.

Guerlan's generous mouth was compressed into a pale scimitar. His odd, slanting green eyes with long dark lashes, were almost black with rebellious fury. Suddenly he was shunted into a special conveyor and a platform where the conveyors to the inner corridors revolved.

"They already know!" He exclaimed bitterly. And he was not wrong. For presently a plastic arm the color and texture of aluminum, but incredibly stronger gathered him in and gently pushed him into an alcove that immediately became hermetically sealed the very moment he had entered. Guerlan saw that he was in an Efficiency Cubicle where technicians were periodically tested. Before him stood a towering Neuro-graph entirely fashioned of several types of plastics including crys-

tallite, as transparent as its namesake. It was an invention so complicated that it resembled nothing so much as a multiplication of tesseracts. Presently it became activated by Guerlan's mental frequency, and one of its slender rods moved forward silently.

A magnetic current went through the analyst and held him rigid, while another rod clamped a plastic helmet over the young man's head. For several seconds the almost inaudible sighing of the complex machinery was the only thing that disturbed the silence. Then, in precise, clipped tones an uncannily human voice began in sonorous tones to summarize his mental and physical coordinates:

"Efficiency totally neutralized by intense mental stress. Subject suffering from psycho-atavistic retrogression. Paranoiac tendencies with delusions of persecution. Immediate fear of death . . . intense."

THERE was a pause in which Guerlan had time to remember how many times he had attended councils with other Scientists of the First Order, when the readings of the Master Neuro-graph on the First Level from which he'd been ejected, had been tabulated from the readings of the various neuro-graphs in the Plastic Centers and transmitted to the Council of the Inner Circle in the City of the Sphere. Guerlan, his eyes flaming, his face mutinous, awaited for the recommendation. It was not long in coming.

"Report to Psychiatry III for amnesiac treatment for removal of *superfluous* knowledge. Recommendation: *Reclassify for Level III.*"

"Damn them!" The desperate rebellion of a man condemned to worse than death rose from his heart as the magnetic rod freed him and the helmet was removed from his head.

He began to circle the cubicle like a trapped animal. "Level III!" He wailed inwardly. The Level of the Automatons conditioned to slave-labor, dwelling in semi-darkness and squalor, on a diet restricted to barest essentials of energy units, until finally the Blessed Sleep claimed him—whatever that was, he shuddered. He'd had six failures in his section—Plastic No. 15, and six meant the ultimate sentence. There was no trial, no jury, no

opportunity even of explaining or seeking in a rational manner the reason for those ghastly explosions. Inexorably, the Law was final. But who was *The Law*? From the high Level of a First Order Scientist engaged in scientific work that had resulted in the miraculous array of plastics that had made their civilization a thing of undreamed of power and wealth, he was cast without recourse to the Level of Darkness—memory-less, reflex-conditioned, practically mindless except for slavish toil and animal needs.

Little had he dreamed, even when a Scientist of the First Order, that there existed such stupendous extremes as the fantastic splendor of the City of the Sphere, and the hellish misery of Level III. The Neuro-graph was speaking again in the sonorous, purple period that made his hackles rise.

"Analyst Guerlan," it intoned and paused impressively. "You have failed in your *Allotment*. Six accidents have destroyed enormous wealth and caused inexcusable damage. You had not less than five previous repetitions of the same type of accident to study and find a solution to the problem . . . a problem given you because of your blasphemous attitude toward the Inner Circle. The sixth explosion was your epitaph. Retribution is The Law.

"You will be immediately conditioned for Level III. Amnesiac Treatment will be administered to save needless suffering—we are merciful—a robot-proctor will guide you henceforth through the various stages. A Protector has spoken." The icy voice was silent.

Guerlan wondered which Protector had passed sentence. The hum of the machine told of coordinators falling into place as his mental and psychic state was recorded, the amount of energy of his metabolism checked and the time potential of his servitude unerringly estimated. A livid glow enveloped the strange instrument, and then, silently, a part of the seemingly blank wall behind him slid aside for a robot-proctor's entrance.

Guerlan knew that the inexorable sentence had been transmitted by remote control through incredibly delicate processes to the machine before him. But who'd decided on the sentence, or why the reason for its harsh cruelty, he had

no way of knowing. He doubted if the elephantine Protector in Chief had bothered to pass it. But Guerlan had no time to dwell on this question, for the beryllastic robot-protor, its non-abradable crystallite eyes gleaming, had grasped him firmly by the elbow to lead him away.

It was then that Guerlan acted without preconceived plan. His magnificent chest arched as he sucked in air; then with a sinuous movement of vertiginous speed, he twisted free and swooping downwards at the same time he grasped the robot by its legs and then heaved with a muscle-wrenching effort, flinging the plastic man with shattering impact into the Neuro-graph. A dry, staccato rattle followed the rending crash. Part of the robot-proctor protruded from what had been the machine's crystallite dome and fragments of delicate mechanism and scintillating shards of priceless *Jadite* showered on the plastic floor.

Instantly the cubicle was illuminated by a vivid, crimson fluorescence, while the opening in the wall began rapidly to close. But Vyr! Guerlan was already speeding toward the closing aperture. Instantly he was through, seconds later only a blank wall showed where an opening had been. A series of alarms in coordinated prismatic flashes flared in every direction, activating the Safety Machines. Long, crane-like alumi-plastic arms extended from ramps and conveyor-heads to trap him; all efficiency cubicles became hermetically sealed cells, and over all, a shrill maddening whine rose in fiendish wail, insistent, nerve-shattering.

Guerlan knew death was at his heels. He dodged the gasping arms and magnetitic traps, straining his extra-sensory perception to its fullest power without slowing down the killing pace he maintained. Still he wondered how long he could last against the diabolical ingenuity of the Inner Circle. If he only had some human to go up against, with atomo-pistols, or the more devastating supernal fire of the electronic flash, forbidden to all but the Inner Circle Scientist—or even the primitive swords and rapiers used to hunt Irreconcilables in Neptune's vast forests. But machines! Soulless, cold plastic machines! His capable hands clenched and unclenched as he flung himself toward the

ascending conveyor before him, his breath labored, his chest heaving.

"No, idiot . . . not that one!" There was an intense urgency in the crystalline voice that speared into his consciousness. Even before he turned to locate the speaker, he recognized the voice. Twice before in a moment of crisis he'd heard it.

"You!" Gerlan breathed explosively. He tensed himself to leap upon the fragile figure at the least movement. But once more the preternaturally calm gaze from the violet eyes held him in thrall.

"That conveyor was purposely set in motion to trap you . . . it leads to Phychiatry III where you would have been neutralized, Guerlan. Take the blue, lapiz-lazuli conveyor behind you to the right. Hurry! We've only seconds before the chamber is gassed!"

Suiting action to his words, the slender scientist dashed to the gleaming plastic conveyor that imitated in all its sapphirine perfection the blue glory of lapiz-lazuli. In an instant Guerlan was beside the scientist in a leap. He grasped the fragile shoulder with fingers that dug into rounded flesh.

"If this is a trap, you die with me," he said briefly.

"Your fingers," the scientist remarked impassively, "are like columbium steel. Suppose you await developments before indulging in atavistic impulses—besides, a real man offers no violence to a woman!"

"A woman . . . you?" Guerlan's dazed expression was ludicrous. "I thought you were one of those repugnantly beautiful 'Intermediates' the Inner Circle uses for intricate mental synthesis."

"Am I repugnantly beautiful?" the scientist asked in cold detachment, luminous violet eyes gazing inscrutably into the reddening features of the young analyst.

GUERLAN gazed at the exquisite face before him, and said laconically, "On the contrary." He was too confused for words just now.

"My name is Perlac," the girl scientist said without preamble. "Listen carefully. This conveyor happens to be the only one that leads to the aero-dome. All the rest have no exit, for although you do not know it, every rest period you are directed to exit-conveyors by magnetic coordinators

that act on impulses sent by Selectors. These selectors are attuned to the mental wave-length of the individual. No scientist, analyst or technician may leave a plastic center without being tested and their fitness for even limited temporary freedom established . . . *not even to rest!* That is why the direction of the conveyors is changed for every allotment period and no one is permitted to know which is the exit conveyor! Had you remained in City of the Sphere and joined the Inner Circle, you would have learned all this."

Guerlan stared at Perlac in incredulity. "But . . . where are the Selectors? I've never seen them!"

"Is that strange? They're in the walls, imbedded in the flooring beneath your feet . . . oh, in a thousand places! But we've no time for involved explanations just now. We're nearing the Aero-dome. Prepare for the worst; but if we can get to my plane, we'll be beyond capture."

"In a slow, propulsion type craft?" Guerlan asked unbelievably. "We'll be captured in minutes, if not blasted out of the Second Level by Robot-Proctors!"

PERLAC turned and gazed into the young analyst's eyes; a gentle, slow smile illumined her features like a tardy dawn.

Suddenly they were at the vast platform that exited into the Aero-dome, but where the great section of wall should have slid aside, it remained blank and hermetically closed. It was a definite dead end.

Far below them a greenish opalescence began to rise in tenuous, billowing clouds, and the faint odor of new-mown hay came almost imperceptibly to their nostrils. From the bowels of the gigantic plant, robot-proctors began to debouch onto the blue conveyor in serried ranks, impervious to death. Guerlan gazed curiously at the girl scientist. "Looks like your plan has failed, Perlac. What I can't understand is why you've thrown your lot in with me. I'm condemned . . . first it was to Level II, then for six failures to the living death of Level III, and now that I have rebelled, I have no end but death. You must have known there were *six failures!*

"Yes, I knew . . . that's why I'm here." The unearthly voice was barely

a whisper. "Ever since the night you were at the Feast of the Jewels and you were appalled at the debauchery of the Inner Circle, you have been chosen. And my plan has not failed!" There was a world of conviction in the exquisite voice, yet she said it softly, very softly indeed.

Slowly Perlac raised her hand, and Guerlan saw it held a tiny, slender instrument the butt of which was a round ball concealed in the palm of her hand. It was the dreadful electronic-flash, and she calmly aimed it at the blank wall, playing it up and down its length. The seemingly impenetrable wall of toughest berylo-plastic parted from top to bottom under the supernatural fire of the electronic-flash, as the electronic balance of the plastic's atomic structure was disrupted and literally dispersed into space. There was no flash, no explosion, nothing but a silent widening of the breach, until it was wide enough to permit Guerlan's herculean shoulders to squeeze through.

Nothing seemed to have issued from the instrument in Perlac's hand, no beam of force, no light—literally nothing, yet, the strongest material known to their civilization, surpassing even the heaviest columbium steel armor, had been riven in seconds.

Once out in the immense Aero-dome, the platform was filled with ships of every description under robot-proctor guard, from tiny electro-copters with retractible vanes, to a large, powerful cruiser reserved for Inspectors of the First Order. The moment Perlac and Guerlan came into view, the robot-proctors aimed their electro-pistols and atomo-pistols, but Perlac already had covered them with her electronic-flash and their plastic bodies disintegrated in seconds.

"The Cruiser!" Guerlan was exultant. "That's what we need, it has the speed and endurance, and perhaps we can get by the robot-guard at the outer gates of the shell, and reach the forests!"

"No," Perlac shook her gold-red mane, "we'll take my ship, no time to argue now . . . you'll see!" She was already running toward a blunt-looking four-seater of the electro-type usually reserved for scientists of the First Order who were not inspectors.

Guerlan hesitated exasperation written

in his face. To disdain a powerful cruiser for this slow-going, vulnerable craft was beyond his comprehension. But Perlac without slackening her stride made a peremptory motion with her slender hand and shouted: "Follow me! I've been right thus far; trust me, you fool!"

Behind them, through the breach in the wall a phalanx of robot-proctors was emerging, and wisps of green gas were beginning to reach the Aero-dome.

In giant strides Guerlan covered the distance to Perlac's plane and entered its cabin. The die was cast, after all he owed her his life in a way. But for her he would be in Psychiatry III right now.

HE HAD scarcely strapped himself, when the ordinary-looking craft shot forward in a dazzling burst of acceleration that pressed Guerlan back against the mulioned seat with almost paralyzing force. But even then his trained faculties noted the sheath of columbium with which the plane was completely lined, and his ears detected the unmistakable hum of powerful atomic engines. One glance at the complex instrument panel told him that here was a craft that was far more than it seemed to be.

But he'd scarcely time to begin to think order out of chaos, when a growing nausea born of the steadily increasing acceleration cleaved his tongue to his palate, and his lower jaw slowly twisted to one side.

Perlac, an immobile figurine of alabaster, eyes closed, seemed crushed against her seat. On and on the plane sped slanting upwards as if determined to crash the transparent barrier that separated them from the next level. And then as suddenly as it began, their terrific speed slackened and the plane levelled off. The intense agony Guerlan had momentarily felt dwindled and disappeared. He saw the girl manipulate what was evidently a robot control, setting it for a new direction and rate of speed, then lock it in place.

"Look downwards, Guerlan, there to our right," Perlac whispered.

An umbrella of atomo-planes in all the sleek glory of deadly interceptors, spread below them in battle formation; behind them the immense plastic pylons that supported the next tier, and the crenelated superstructure of Level II, combined with

distance to dwarf them into toy-like dimensions. The semi-transparent roof of Level II was dangerously near, Guerlan saw, and the forest of pylons dead ahead that marked the center of their level was another fatal hazard. But Perlac manipulated the intricate controls with casual ease leaving the rate of speed and general direction to the robot-control, she merely made minute adjustments.

"We outdistanced them!" Guerlan was awed. That anything in the possession of even an Inner Circle scientist could outdistance the Pursuit Fleet of the Protector in Chief was unimaginable.

"This spacer's something His Benevolence would give the Diadem Jewel for—or rather for the secret of its construction!" The girl laughed softly. "It's atomic, of course, but a variation based on a principle that goes beyond Terran equations."

Guerlan gazed wonderingly at the exquisite features of the fragile girl-scientist, marveling at the incredible courage of this puzzling being who unaccountably had chosen to throw in her lot with his own.

"Perlac," Guerlan spoke thoughtfully. "I'm afraid today has been something of a mystery. From what I've seen you do to that Aero-dome wall, the inexplicable accidents of the acid vats were undoubtedly your doing. Yet, you've saved my life and in so doing forfeited your own. Why? What interest can you possibly have in a doomed life such as mine?"

The girl smiled slowly, ineffably, in a mixture of melancholy sweetness and inexpressable sadness. She turned her golden head slightly and when she spoke her voice had sombre overtones rich with emotion.

"Do you know what is piped into the so-called organic vats, Guerlan? No, you wouldn't know. Plants, you thought, beasts and cattle and dead flesh. . . . Dead, yes. The murdered bodies of human beings, such as *you* would have been!"

All Guerlan's rigid training rose in protest at the charge against the Protector in Chief. It could not be! There could be no murder in Plastica, duels yes, honorable combat between men . . . but murder! He acknowledged that the Laws of Plastic, Inc., were ruthless and harsh, and the Inner Circle had become lax in their supervision,

until Plastics, Inc., had become an octopus. But to imply that His Benevolence would countenance cold-blooded murder . . . every fiber of his being revolted from such a charge.

And then he remembered the Feast of the Jewels, and the travesty of justice in his case, and he was silenced.

"His Benevolence and the Inner Circle are Plastics, Inc." Perlac continued imperturbably as if reading his thoughts. "Don't argue now, strap yourself and prepare for an orbital fall, we'll wheel in direct ratio with the rotation of the planet then dive in a concentric spiral that will become tighter and tighter until we reach our objective. It is the only way we can elude the robot-proctor patrol. . . . Look, they are climbing already. The plane's robot control is set and timed—it will take us there. No human being can possibly retain consciousness to guide the plane in such a maneuver," she explained, pale as alabaster.

BEFORE Vyrl Guerlan had time to do else but tighten the broad straps and lean back against the mullioned seat, the girl had touched a series of knobs. Suddenly the craft began to wheel with meteoric speed, then dived with a violence that sent the landscape spinning into a fantastic pattern that quickly blurred. Guerlan felt as if the very marrow in his bones had liquefied, an intolerable pain lanced at the back of his brain like an atomic needle, and his face was contorted into a spasmodic grimace he was unable to control. He tried to close his eyes but couldn't, tried to shout and suddenly plummeted into an abyss.

They were diving downward into the outskirts of the immense city, down a secret inter-communicating passage that connected the various levels, past the third, fourth and finally into a yawning chasm where all was darkness. The hurtling craft sped on unerringly as if drawn by a magnetic beam.

When Guerlan finally awoke, he found himself in intense darkness. Only his labored breath disturbed the silence. Motionless, his body a living pain, he tried to adjust his thoughts and piece together the jig-saw puzzle of the last few hours. Groping into his tunic he brought out an atomo-torch. By its discreet illumination,

he saw that the girl was quivering like a being in torture. Gently he massaged her temples and the base of her neck then her soft, white throat; with infinite care he opened her mouth and inserted a pellet of *alphaline* to stimulate her heart, then stroked the gleaming red-gold hair back from her forehead until the girl showed signs of coming to.

"Have you any stimulants aboard?" he asked her, when Perlac opened her eyes. "I feel drained, but that's nothing to what you must feel, Perlac!"

She gave him a pallid smile. "There," she pointed weakly, "to the left of the instrument panel."

Guerlan pressed the combination lock and found in the compartment a full kit of surgical instruments and bandages in a superb *Jadite* case. A priceless flask of *Sapphirac* filled with sterile water, and, to his intense surprise, a Platino-plastic bottle, encrusted with tourmalines more brilliant than emeralds and filled with the utterly proscribed *Sulfalixir*!

"That . . . that's it," Perlac gasped and reached for the bottle in Guerlan's hand.

"But, it's deadly!" Guerlan was aghast. "How can you risk addiction to that dreadful drug?"

"You're a victim of conditioning." Even as weak as she felt, Perlac managed a low laugh, "*Sulfalixir* is a miracle drug—not what you've been taught to believe." She drank sparingly and offered him the bottle, but Guerlan drew back in categorical refusal. "As you wish. Now we must leave the plane."

"But where in ten thousand Hellacariums are we?" Guerlan's voice was mutinous. "I've been a pawn in a game ever since I went to the sphere and blasphemed, since you burst the acid vat and exploded Organic 66! By Neptune's Moon I'll be dissolved if I stir another step without knowing what this is all about!" His green eyes were wide and gleaming, his handsome face set in rigid lines.

"All right, atavism! You're on Level Five, and you're going to a meeting. I want you to appraise what the Amnesiac treatment does to human beings, and how the condemned live on this level. The third level is sheer luxury compared to this. You Scientists of the First Level

have no conception of what happens on the third, fourth and fifth levels, where life ceases to be even existence and becomes. . . ." But words failed her, and she fell back against her mullioned seat breathing heavily. After a pause she asked: "Will you come now?"

"No," Guerlan grinned. "I'll lead the way. It was an experience seeing you in a fury; blessed if I thought anything could disturb you!" He stood up and pressed the plane's dome release and the stale, fetid air of the nether regions of the city swept in. Only the conditioners broke the silence with their constantly iterated and reiterated subconscious homily of simple, child-like thought-patterns for the amnesiacs. It was an eternal reiteration of the "Conditioning Controls" which no amnesiac could ever escape, except at intervals when the amnesiac counter-reaction set in as their metabolism building up a resistance to the administered drug rendered them impervious and they regained a measure of their former memories as consciousness returned. That was the period of danger, when they were at the verge of any madness, in their utter hopelessness. Deliberately they invited death. But here in these vast catacombs, their end was but a detail, and the organic vats eventually received them.

"Listen!" It was Perlac's voice indistinct with indignation, "listen to the 'conditioners,' Guerlan!"

"Sleep . . . sleep now. Deep, dreamless sleep . . . for the conservation of your energy is your noblest effort . . . so you may conserve your strength for work . . . work . . . you must, you absolutely must *Achieve* . . . so that you may fulfill your maximum allotment . . . maximum . . . and be rewarded. . . . Sleep . . . sleep. . . ."

Endlessly the fiendish mosaic of lies and psychological half-truths went on and on, imbedding itself in the violated minds that slept in the stupor of the utterly exhausted.

Guerlan shivered. A malefic aura of death and torture seemed woven into the matrix of darkness that surrounded them. The very odor of death was in their nostrils as they left the atomo-plane by the light of his torch and faced the narrow, tortuous thoroughfare that wended its way

from the wide circle where the plane had come to rest.

Perlac pressed close to him and her slender hand gripped his arm. There were no robot-proctors in sight, none were needed here where no amnesiac ever left alive. No victims were in sight, for the day workers rested and the nocturnal shift toiled in their prisoning workrooms. Behind them, in front of them, from every side, the Conditioners continued their endless chant: "Loyalty . . . obedience . . . unquestioningly you must achieve . . . for our glorious State."

III

IN THE abysmal darkness their atomo-torch was a pool of light that advanced before them. But Perlac unerringly went directly to a building whose front seemed to be an impenetrable, blank wall. She pressed a hidden mechanism near the far corner of the structure, and presently a door slid aside, revealing a passage-way to the beam of the torch. Once within, Guerlan became aware it was some sort of dormitory, for stretched on rows of cots made of cheap plastic, the amnesiacs slept in their leaden tunics. These were the pitchblende workers who had but a brief life-period, due to the radiations.

In another corridor slept the brown-tunics, the organic-matter workers, blood-stained from their gruesome labors, their stertorous breathing witness to their exhaustion. Perlac kept on rapidly going from corridor to corridor until she stopped at a door leading to the cellar, opening it, she scrambled down a plastic ladder, followed by Guerlan, and finally into a sub-cellar gallery that wound tortuously into the very bowels of Neptune.

Here were the sightless wrecks who lived in eternal darkness and whose task was to tend the machinery that air-conditioned and kept reasonably warm the dreadful Fifth Level. Some seemed strangely twisted and had the loathsome whiteness of fungi, others mindlessly tottered by like automatons. Guerlan drew aside in a mixture of nausea and profound pity. A welling, terrible anger strove to rise within him at the sight of these horrors that went by like Dantesque shadows of the damned.

At last Perlac stopped and made six

curious rasping sounds at a heavy rocky section of the dripping wall.

As if in a nightmare, Guerlan saw part of the stone surface pivot silently inward, and before them was another passage-way. But this one was immaculately clean, completely sheathed in neutral grey heteroplastic, and the aura-lumes diffused a gentle light that was soft and yet perfectly measured. The murmur of voices reached them, and the air was fresh and exhilarating after the fetid, miasmatic air of the Fifth Level and the sub-cellars.

"We have arrived, Guerlan!" Perlac gazed at the young scientist, as if essaying to appraise his reactions to what he'd seen en route. "You're going to meet the leaders of the Irreconcilables . . . not those poor creatures of the forests and jungles, but the real 'underground' that has but one purpose—Freedom from the Protectors. Now, do you understand why you were brought here?"

Guerlan nodded in silence. His face was impassive, but the odd, slanting green eyes were burning with lambent fires and his powerful hands were knotted.

WITHIN seconds the passageway led them to an immense cavern—on Terra it would have been unthinkable, but in keeping with Neptune's bulk, the cavern was a gargantuan retreat. Stupendous stalactites pending from the ceiling defied adjectives, their bases lost in darkness. The walls as far as the eye could reach were sheathed in a gleaming plastic new to Guerlan. The floor, too, was resilient plastic, smooth, and perfectly laid, as if an army of workmen and machines had labored on its perfection, which indeed they had. Buildings clustered at the far distant end, like a miniature city; and in the very center of the vast grotto, surrounded by an army of scientists and technicians, an atomo-Spacer, super-armored and longer than any Guerlan had ever seen, rested in its cradle in all its sleek, shining glory.

Testing and repair machines were scattered around the great subterranean chamber, driven by technicians and co-ordinators who worked feverishly, silently, as if engaged in a life-and-death race with time.

Toward the left, where the cavern extended into another vast grotto, an

ordine-plastic building caught Guerlan's eye because of the fact that it was ordine. That plastic was used only where need for staunchest material existed. Ordine, an adaptation of the plastic mineral principle, could withstand a siege—was practically indestructible, and Guerlan wondered what it housed. Perlac sensed his curiosity and gazed in turn at the great structure. Her eyes brooding and dark with an emotion he could not fathom slowly filled with tears.

"That's the psycho-clinic," she told him. "We try to neutralize the amnesiac treatment, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. Under certain conditions, it can be neutralized, but remember the amnesiac treatment here on Level Five is an intensification of the treatment applied on Levels Three and Four. . . . They're practically lost when they come here, but our work in the higher levels is too dangerous to be carried out in large numbers. Care to go in and watch the therapy used?"

"Yes." Guerlan's laconic reply was an index of his mental state. Words came with difficulty in the face of this ghastly drama that had suddenly unfolded before his eyes.

He wondered about the other cities, Perdura, and Telluria and semi-tropical Columbia, with its warm springs and teeming soil where the most exquisite delicacies for the Inner Council, and to a lesser extent the First Order were grown. Wondered if they, too, were condemned to this inhuman rule of death and oppression.

Perlac made a signal to one of the technicians, and a two-seater "Treader" with its revolving belt instead of wheels moved out from among the parked vehicles. But before Guerlan and Perlac could enter the swift surface car, a dull roar that seemed to shake the very foundations of the cavern paralyzed all movement, as if in a slow motion-picture of ancient days, a tremendous section of the cavern wall fell in a shower of rock and plastic, and through the gaping breach, rank upon serried rank of "Intermediates" poured through. They wore the Inner Council's conventional plastic armor, vividly scarlet, with tight-fitting helmets of crysto-plast. Silently they deployed with grim precision and aimed their atomo-rifles.

But if they had expected to wreak

havoc aided by the element of surprise, they were mistaken. Technicians and scientists working on the super-spacer, instantly entered the armored ship, while the army of mechanics, graders, coordinators and workmen, who labored on treaders and tended the mechanical appliances and repair machines, took cover in and behind their charges.

For a second Guerlan had been frozen in his tracks. The thought that flashed into his mind was one of exultation instead of despair. Here was an enemy he could really fight. All the pent-up fury, the terrible anger of a decent man who has had all his beliefs swept away in a matter of hours, who had seen depths of human degradation he had never dreamed possible, was like a bath of cold fire that left him calm, determined and with one desire . . . to exterminate.

As if she were a doll, Guerlan swept Perlac beside the armored "Treader" and without preamble snatched the Electro-Flash the girl wore at her waist. "Keep covered. Let me do the fighting!" He exclaimed, impervious to her outraged stare. Carefully he aimed at the foremost leader of the Intermediates, and the obscenely beautiful, sexless warrior, crumpled as part of him instantly dissolved. A vast, coruscating sheet of blue, atomic fire swept forward from the deadly atomo-rifles of the invaders, and vehicles, technicians, and several machines, became a welter of smoking flesh and melting metal.

It was then the super-spacer went into action with its two frontal atomo-guns, the thunderous echoes vibrated with tympani-shattering force, and Guerlan saw a phalanx of Intermediates vanish as if they were leaves in a wind.

UNAWARE of doing so, Guerlan was bellowing exultantly, as he played the Electro-Flash horizontally across another phalanx that had succeeded in gaining the proximity of the Spacer. They had seen him now, and the survivors aimed their atomo-rifles at the treader that sheltered them from the blue fire. But before they could bring their fire into focus, the supernal fire of the electro-flash had decimated them. A few managed to direct the stream of atomic fire on the treader,

however, and half of it was a molten mass while the rest was already cherry red and the heat becoming unendurable.

Electro-rifles, atomo-pistols, the guns from the giant spacer and a few electro-flash weapons were concentrated on the Intermediates who by sheer force of numbers had gained the center of the Cave.

And then they were met by a wall of flesh. From the buildings at the further end and from every vehicle and machine a wall of humanity surged forward, firing ceaselessly, hacking with long-swords and poniards; and the carnage under the brilliant plastilumes was without quarter . . . to the death. Slowly, inch by inch, the Intermediates were driven back. Scores had died, and the losses among the defenders were appalling; it seemed as if a Pyrrhic victory was to be the end. And then, like creatures from a nightmare, released from depths of living hell, a motley, ragged, maddened multitude came shrieking, shouting and hurling imprecations from the chaste building Perlac had called the Psycho-clinic. Like avenging furies, they flung themselves at the hard-pressed Intermediates. Wounds did not stop them; atomic-fire left gaping holes in their ranks, around which the survivors raced on. Impervious to pain, and welcoming death, these travesties of human beings fought with the savagery of madness.

They were the Amnesiacs. Deprived of the hypnotic drug, partly in possession of their faculties and their memories, they remembered! And remembering, they paid back for the torture of a lifetime!

Assailed from every side, the crack Inner Circle battalion of Intermediates split into two halves and strove to meet both fronts. But Guerlan with a cry that would have done credit to a Venusian *Calamar*, snatched the sword from a fallen technician and raced to where the Amnesiacs were tangled in a death struggle. With the electro-flash in his left hand, he stabbed and hacked at exposed limbs and through shattered cristo-plast. And the battle turned slowly, increasing in tempo until it was a rout that pressed the remaining Intermediates into a demoralized race of life. But they were not to escape. Out of all control, all semblance of humanity now, the remaining Amnesiacs were a screaming horror that pursued the quarry

and pulled it down like the giant *Calamar* of Venus pulls down its prey in the virgin forests, until only the moaning wounded and the dead remained on the blood-drenched plastic flooring of the titanic grotto.

Guerlan never knew when the battle was finally over. His tunic was a crimson stain from top to bottom; a long slash across his ribs to the center of his powerful chest, had left a shallow gash that dripped a slow gout of blood. His shoulder was seared by a slanting atomic-blast that would have taken half of him had it come any nearer. He became aware of the ghastly silence only when Perlac's marvelously slender hand was pressed to his cheek, and her melodious voice was repeating: "Guerlan, Guerlan, my dear!" He turned and saw her eyes were aswim with unshed tears.

He took her hand in his powerful ones without a word, and held it caressingly, while all about them was a shambles of death and wreckage.

"My initiation," he said slowly, huskily, with a hint of a smile in his long, green eyes.

"I knew I was not wrong in choosing you," Perlac replied and bravely essayed a smile, too; but she had reached the end of her physical resources and with a whispered, "Oh, my dear," she wilted unconscious in his arms.

Guerlan lifted her fragile form as she were a precibus doll and walked toward the super-spacer; a group of scientists who had emerged from its interior, watched his approach with a hint of anxiety as they motioned for him to hurry. Among them, a tall, elderly scientist of the second order, whose white mane was like an aureole about the pale, sharp-featured face, hurried forward as if unable to contain himself.

"Is Perlac wounded?" He inquired with a world of worry in his voice. "Tell me, man! Hurry!"

"Peace," Guerlan answered wearily. "She's not harmed, just fainted . . . the miracle is that she's been able to stand as much as she has. Have you restoratives?"

"Bring her into the plane, we have everything needed, stranger. Praised be the Ultimate Power she has not been harmed!" Then he drew himself erect as he and

Guerlan came abreast of each other, and said with quiet dignity:

"I am Paulan, ex-scientist of the first order, now Leader of the Underground. I saw you fight with us. Welcome, my son." His eyes were as clear and as blue as a child's, but the fires of a profound intellect shone from their depths.

"THE TIME," Guerlan was speaking, "is now, not at some supposedly psychological moment logically thought by the Board. I'm a new member, true, but it is evident the Inner Circle has been aware of your activities for some time, or they wouldn't have sent such a well-armed, ultra-trained battalion of Intermediates. The time to strike is now! Unless you want to await an attack in such force that this cavern will become a hecatomb."

"We are already harassing them in every city," Paulan said thoughtfully. "Vats are exploding regularly, amnesiacs are being restored to usefulness and our forces are increasing day by day. What more would you propose, my son, an attack on the city of the sphere?"

All eyes in the heavily guarded and armed Board meeting room were upon the young scientist. At the head of the long, exquisite Platino-plastic table sat Paulan, the leader, and at his right sat Perlac. All down the length of the great table, scientists of the first and second orders, analysts, technicians, and even members of the lower strata chosen for their value to the movement, sat to consider the crisis. Their underground movement was in the open now, and they could expect nothing but extermination at the hands of the Inner Circle.

"That would be madness at present," spoke a tiny Venusian, not more than four and a half feet tall, wrapped in his long, scarlet wings that joined to the sides of his fragile body, reached from wrists to his ankles. "Although," he grinned impishly, "I would like to take a crack at them in their holy of holies!"

Morluc, the Martian, snorted.

"Mars will help, but we must have a share of the machinery and plastics of Neptune . . . a *preferred* share," he emphasized gazing disdainfully at the Venusian member.

"Equal shares!" the latter snapped dryly.

"Mars' help is still to be seen, as your excellence is aware!" The Venusian drove his point home with emphatic gestures.

"We've offered our fleet!" Morluc, the Martian member, said stiffly. "Can any more be asked?"

Carladin, the Venusian, shrugged his shoulders. "We don't offer, Morluc, we've delivered one hundred electro-flash pistols, and it took genius to analyze and copy the design and manufacture them secretly, not to speak of smuggling them here!"

"Peace!" Paulan thundered. "Scientist Guerlan is unable to reply to my question!"

Both the Martian and the Venusian members were silent, although they still glared at each other across the table. The rivalry of Venus and Mars was legendary and had endured for centuries. Little eddies of whispers and conversation, came to a standstill, and once more their eyes were turned expectantly toward Guerlan who stood up from his seat toward the foot of the table.

"I have a plan," he stated quietly. His bandaged shoulder and chest were living aches, and breathing was difficult, but a great enthusiasm transfigured his features until with eyes alight with the fire of a great purpose, he seemed boyish for all his magnificent height and musculature.

"Unless we divert the power of the Inner Circle . . . I say *divert*, but decisively, we're doomed. Any army we can muster would be met by the legions of fanatical Intermediates who from pre-birth are conditioned and scientifically bred for battle. An Intermediate's glandular structure has been modified to heighten unbelievably the combative instinct. If atomo-rifles and atomic fire don't crush us, they'll start using electro-flash. Their fleet is legion, and they have at their command the Scientists of the First Order, as deluded as I was, not to speak of the Neophytes of the Inner Circle. Don't forget that the City of the Sphere has two million scientists, not counting the women.

"But, if we divert their Intermediates, cut off their sources of supply, and breed revolt *on every tier, in every city*, their forces will be divided, and we will have a chance to win. When I was a child, I had access to the ancient records which were translated by my father for the Inner Circle. Among them I came upon a parch-

ment so ancient that it was ready to crumble into dust. After it had been treated for preservation, I read the translation made from that forgotten language by my father; it was about a great city that once ruled most of Terra, and their motto was—Divide and Rule. And that," Guerlan paused, "is my plan."

He sat down a little abashed when he realized the vehemence with which he had been talking. His eyes sought Perlac's, and a wave of color suffused his face as he saw the open admiration in the girl's eyes.

"Magnificent, if it works," Carladin said with a satirical smile in that husky voice of his that seemed too big for so small a body. "But, my friend, who is going to 'Muzzle the Calamar'? In other words, who is going to breed revolt in every city and tier . . . and, above all, just how?"

"My son, you can't rouse emotions in amnesiacs—they haven't any, even in the higher levels where the treatment is mild. As for the scientists of the Second Order—they'd consider revolt blasphemy, not to speak of the First Order. Unless you have a complete, thought-out plan, I'm afraid you've been carried away by your own enthusiasm," Paulan said very gently.

"My plan is complete, Paulan. And I have work for both Venus and Mars. I'm sure they would like to share in our victory. Listen!"

IV

IT WAS NOT only a garden of vast dimensions, it was an Eden riotous with the most exquisite blooms of Venus, and myriad bright-plumaged birds that sang with a complete abandon that bespoke no instinct of fear, for they were sacred. In the near distance, the rose and white crys-toplast temple of the Virgins of the Sacred Flame was a triumph in architecture, for here within the inviolate garden of His Benevolence was the sacred shrine.

A muted orchestra was playing, hidden in the foliage, and the incredible re-creation of sunlight drew an iridescent aureole from the alabaster fountain that constantly renewed a miniature lake in the center of the garden.

Rose-colored *Garzas* and sparkling, blue azurines searched for tid-bits in the shallows, while a flight of *Albas*, the snowy-

white nightingales of the Volcanic Valley, swept overhead in an ecstasy of song. It was idyllic, a spot instinct with peace under the soft hand of beauty.

But near the shore of the small lake, idly moving his hand in the cool waters, while with the other he stuffed roasted doves into the red, cruel mouth, His Benevolence listened in ominous silence as the Chief of the Intermediates made his report. Standing behind the gargantuan corpulence of the 'Protector in Chief', Bejamel listened, too, and his gargoyle's features slowly registered a rising fear that whitened his repulsive face. It was incredible! Had anyone else dared to make such a report, he would have instantly banished him or her to the 'Blessed Sleep.' But the Intermediates, be they either of the warrior class, and trained to fight to the death, or of the scientist category, were cold, unemotional beings whose precision could not be questioned. As for their loyalty—that was under control, for their only imperative was Vanadol, reacting on them curiously instead of drugging them to sleep—compensating them for their sexlessness with an unearthly ecstasy. And Vanadol was under absolute Inner Circle control . . . under Bejamel!

"Only three Intermediates escaped alive from the caverns under the fifth level?" Bejamel inquired incredulously in that magnificent voice that was a melody in itself.

"Silence!" There was nothing lovely in the harsh command of His Benevolence. "Bunglers! Should condemn you and your strategists to the Blessed Sleep, but the quota of jewels is filled. . . . What do you plan doing now? Or are you going to let those Irreconcilables become a cancer on the side of the empire?" His voice became indistinct as he stuffed golden nectarines into his mouth.

"Magnificence! If your Benevolence permits. . . ." Bejamel's attempt at a smile was a ludicrous failure. But the sulphuric stare he received for his pains, left him wordless and pale.

"Proceed!" His Benevolence nodded at the Intermediate. The pale yellow eyes were blazing.

"Our plans are to destroy the cavern immediately, and utilize our Intermediate Scientists to ferret out the dissenters for

disposal at your Effulgence's orders." The Chief of the Intermediates replied calmly, evenly, as if his life were not hanging by the thinnest thread. He bowed profoundly, and then stood erect, in all the glory of his golden tunic and platinum-plastic helmet.

"Also, a flight of pursuit atomo-planes awaits disorders in every tier of every city, Your Benevolence!"

"Like over-fed blackbirds," His Benevolence observed scornfully. "They didn't prevent Guerlan and that unidentified companion of his from escaping! And that reminds me, Bejamel," his voice changed to a silken purr. "I thought you had checked the safety coordination of the plastic centers. Surely, with all the safeguards you reported installed, the machines supplied you by scientists, and the robot-proctor guard, not to speak of the selector-controlled tests of the workmen, I still fail to understand how Guerlan escaped retribution." His lips parted in a smile of sadistic pleasure, as Bejamel went green.

"**A**ND," His Benevolence held up a hand that flashed with a vortex of prismatic fire from the many jewels, "what has become of your daughter, Perlac? I seldom see her any more."

"Since Your Benevolence said that her hips were too narrow and her face too sharp, I banished her from your presence, Effulgence!"

"Well, bring her back!" He snapped in fury. "Sometimes I think you usurp my authority, Bejamel." His eyes narrowed speculatively, and the enmity he felt for the Minister of Justice because of the latter's silent opposition to allowing his daughter to become a Virgin of the Sacred Flame, smouldered within him.

Bejamel bowed profoundly, but a glint of savage rage shone in his eyes.

"Send the Virgins . . . let them sing!" His Benevolence commanded, "and convey my forgiveness to Estrella; she may enter the presence!"

"Your Benevolence's favorite will rejoice at the magnanimous decision!" Bejamel replied in a soft murmur that was sheer music. But the expression on his averted face belied his words.

He hurried away through the foliage of the Venusian Jasmine trees and

the tangles of fragrant Maravillas, until he came to the pavillion of white *Jadite*, so exquisitely planned that in its white simplicity it might have been an idealized Greek temple.

"Estrella," he called the moment that he entered. "Hurry, child!" And seeing her curled on a couch worth a respectable fortune, "He will see you . . . mind you, he's in a vile temper—as capricious as I've ever seen him. But evidently he has need of you. Soothe him from this evil mood, or we'll all suffer!" He paused out of breath.

Estrella uncoiled languorously from the Sapphirine couch and stood lightly swathed in filmiest draperies of spider silk, that revealed the distracting beauty of her limbs and full, firm breast. The large, brilliant dark eyes, shadowed by curling lashes were rebellious and scornful, and the flower-like red mouth mutinous. A cascade of pale gold hair tumbled curling about the marble shoulders, and sent gleaming tendrils to the satiny throat, encircled by a necklace of star-sapphires, rarest of all jewels because of the tremendous difficulties in creating the star in the depths of the jewel.

"Let him wait . . . I have had to wait too long!" she blazed.

"Sheesh! . . . even the walls have ears, Star of the Evening! And remember his saying: 'A favorite in disfavor is a jewel that has crystallized'. He means that literally; I couldn't bear to see you as a ruby in his finger ring."

Estrella paled, shrugged her shoulders and dashed out of the pavillion. Out in the garden, she was like a butterfly in the sunlight, a gorgeous creature that came to rest at His Benevolence's feet. A choir of Virgins sang softly and undulated with the rhythm of the music, while His Benevolence fondled Estrella with one hand and with the other ate.

Meanwhile, in the sumptuous Audience Chamber, a multitude of Protectors of the Inner Circle, Scientists of the First Order, the Directors of various cities, and even Intermediate Scientists moved restlessly, pacing up and down the imposing length of the chamber. Their faces were pale and anxious; some seemed distraught, rehearsing silently, over and over in their minds what they had to say.

But among themselves they barely spoke.

A careless word, flung in a moment of anxiety, might be the beginning of a fatal intrigue. They were taking no chances.

The dour, ascetic visaged Marvalli, Scientist of the Inner Circle and Chief of Columbia, seemed on the verge of nervous prostration. He wondered in anguish what would His Benevolence say when he learned that the warehouses filled with exquisite tropical and semi-tropical delicacies for his table and that of the Inner Circle, had been destroyed by a raging holocaust that had left nothing but blackened cinders, and that the priceless machinery for the Vibroponic farms, which speeded up the growth and maturity of exotic plants and fruits, and a multitude of legumes and vegetables, was a twisted, molten mass—he quaked inwardly and a cold sweat oozed out of his pores.

Vidal, Chief of Plastica had a harrowing report too. Vat after vat of processing acid had split in halves and flooded moats and safety levels until the acrid fumes made the Plastic Centers of his city untenable. Conveyors had been disrupted and even robot-proctors dissolved as if they'd been made of *papier-mache*. All his efforts at locating the source of these depredations were in vain. Meanwhile, the plastic industry in Plastica was paralyzed. That as bad as it was, however, could be remedied temporarily by the installation of more vats, but an amazing thing was that even the replacement vats had been found damaged beyond repair.

BUT of them all, Weiman, "The Butcher", as he was called, was the most distraught of all. Never in all the history of Perdura, his beloved Perdura, where the Neptunian *Bagaso* plant was processed into the drug for the amnesiac treatment, had such depredations been committed. A veritable nightmare of explosions had shattered the intricate machinery of the processors; the receiving vats of staunchest plastic had been found in shards and slivers, while the stores of the sacred drug had disappeared. An emergency order sent to the nurseries where the plants were grown obtained no response and investigation disclosed that the nurseries had been destroyed.

It was then he had ordered a search party to go into the semi-tropical forests far

up the valley in search of wild plants and they were met by a savage mob of Irreconcilables! But not the gravity-burdened, frightened Irreconcilables he had been used to hunt with lances and swords, but a grim, determined company of fighters armed with atomo-pistols and atomo-rifles who exterminated the searching party except one member, whom they sent back with the insolent warning: "Stay out of our land!"

The atmosphere of the Audience Chamber was electric. A wave of rebellion seemed to be sweeping the Empire.

When Bejamel, Minister of Justice, entered the Chamber, there was a concerted rush to meet him.

"Excellency, I request an audience!" And from another Chief of a City. "Nay, Excellency . . . Mine cannot wait, it's a catastrophe!" "I crave a hearing . . .! Your Excellency!" Pandemonium had broken loose in the chaste precincts of the Audience Hall.

"Peace!" Bejamel shouted above the tumult, and strove to present a calm exterior. But an icy fear constricted his throat, and his usually commanding tones of unearthly beauty failed him. Nevertheless he stemmed somewhat the rising confusion.

"You, Vidal!" Bejamel singled out the Inner Circle Scientist in charge of Plastica. "Your report."

"I demand Martial Rule, and sufficient troops to insure order," Vidal gasped. "Plastica's paralyzed. Most of the plastic-acid vats have been destroyed; conveyors in shambles and robot-proctors disintegrated. I know of only one weapon capable of shattering Columbium-Plastic and Bery-Plastic—and do it without a sound. These weapons are electro-flash, and assigned to the Inner Circle. When an Inner Circle Scientist loses the one assigned to him, he is under penalty to report it immediately. I can't conceive how these weapons could have fallen into the hands of whoever these depredators are, and in sufficient numbers to wreak such havoc in such a short time!"

"I didn't ask for a diagnosis, and least of all for a cure!" Bejamel said frigidly. "I asked for symptoms. Your report, Vidal!"

And Vidal gave it, freed from the fear His Benevolence's presence always inspired,

he gave it bitterly, in complete detail.

"And you Marvalli?" Bejamel's voice shook a little despite his efforts to control it. From Marvalli's expression he feared the worst.

"Columbia has been unable to provide its quota of special foods for forty-eight hours, and all its reserves have been destroyed." In a voice filled with foreboding, he told his story, wringing his hands from time to time, unconscious of doing it.

Weiman was next. He gave a minute account of depredations in Perdura. "And so," he finished in an anguished voice, "we not only have no Bagazo for the amnesiac treatment . . . we are unable to procure any, and even if we had it, the machinery is a shambles, Excellency!" His voice ended in a wail.

On and on the audience continued, each account adding to the seriousness of the situation. At last Bejamel rose. His face was inscrutable. "What a gargantuan indigestion His Benevolence is going to have today," he thought grimly.

"Remain!" He exclaimed peremptorily, and strode in the direction of the enchanted garden.

HE DIDN'T even pause to watch the gyrations and posturings of Virgins of the Sacred Flame. Brushing aside the tall Intermediates that stood guard over the recumbent form of His Benevolence, he bowed slightly, and in a cold, tight voice explained his mission.

"Your Benevolence," his voice never had been lovelier, "the empire is in open revolt. We are not facing isolated cases of vandalism. Nor the underground opposition of the Irreconcilables. This is a fiendishly planned and perfectly executed strategy of destruction. Unless we meet it with overwhelming force, we lose control of the empire!"

"Don't exaggerate, Bejamel!" His Benevolence snorted disdainfully. "A few vats have been shattered—others can be made. Bagazo has been destroyed . . . we'll get all we need from the forests, and later have our chemists synthesize the drug. Just issue the necessary orders, I can't be bothered now."

Bejamel's smile was feline, and feral lights gleamed in the eyes that gave him

such a gargoylish expression amidst his twisted features.

"No, Effulgence. This calls for a meeting of the Inner Circle. You may not know it, but hundreds of thousands of amnesiacs, now deprived of the drug, *remember!* Death to them is a boon, and before they die they will be sure to take as many of us as possible. And *they are being armed!*"

"Let a few thousand die!" He exclaimed heartlessly. "They'll pave my new Hall of Rubies!" But he knew now that Bejamel was not exaggerating. The great intellect of the evil ruler, had grasped the disastrous consequences of such a revolt, and instantly he acted.

"Very well, Bejamel. Call the Council. Hold all witnesses for the session. Meanwhile, mobilize all the Intermediates of the warrior order, and the Scientists of the first and second orders. Every Inner Circle Scientist who is still worthy of his rank, and all Inner Circle Neophytes to be in readiness. Make a survey of robot-proctors, and coordinate all available defenses. We can at least be ready at a moment's notice. And, find out how long our present stores of food will last . . . we should have enough for months! Think you can remember all this?" He purred mockingly.

"To hear your Benevolence is to obey!" Bejamel replied imperturbably. And left to carry out the orders. A little smile was at the corners of his mouth, and the feral light was still lambent in his strange green eyes.

He could hear His Benevolence's harsh tones as the latter told His Virgins: "Get out!" Only Estrella remained by the side of the obscene bulk. Bejamel pitied her.

ONCE back in the Audience Chamber, pandemonium broke loose, but with a peremptory wave of his hand and the words: "You will remain as witnesses for a full meeting of the Council tonight," Bejamel quelled them. He watched them file out with a speculative gaze. "When the sea's disturbed," he murmured softly, "creatures from the bottom rise to the top." Then he walked slowly to his own chambers, singing softly to himself, and it was as if the voice of an angel were issuing from the throat of a Gargoyle.

Only one thought worried him, and that was the protracted absence of Perlac. She

had been gone for days. Perhaps he had missed her in his preoccupation with duties of State, he thought. Bejamel shrugged his thin shoulders and sat down at a jewel-encrusted desk worthy of an Inner Circle Scientist ransom. Silently he began to write with an electro-stylus on a sheet of transparent plastic. Nothing showed.

It was to Gualdamar, whom to give the full plenitude of his titles was Chief Guardian of the City of the Flaming Sphere, The Leader of the Intermediate Warriors, Chief Strategist, and Scientist of the Inner Circle.

As Bejamel wrote, he thought with part of his mind of the many minor revolts that had occurred when the amnesiac treatment failed because of the defense against the drug that human metabolism built periodically, but nothing like this had ever happened in the annals of the Empire. Plastic Inc., as the Inner Circle taught the people to believe, was part of them, and they rose and fell together. It occurred to Bejamel that he was very old, it was indecent to thrust such a crisis on his fading intellect. The thought made his smile acidly. There was nothing decadent about that Machiavelian mind that enabled him to remain in power through decades of intrigues, pitfalls and traps, and lately, the growing enmity of his Benevolence because he would not allow Perlac to become a chattel of his Obese Effulgence in the Temple of the Sacred Flame.

He wondered if he would be able to weather this crisis. Still he wrote swiftly, invisibly on the transparent plastic, and as he did so, the thought of Venus, great in its first bloom of advanced civilization, of Europa, transmuted into an Eden by the courage of its Terrans and the strange unearthly science of the Panadurs. If all else failed, he could seek sanctuary in either one of these two planets. Mars repelled him, none of that grim land for his weary bones. But if he had to flee, he meant to flee alone with Perlac, and he had a score to settle before he went.

When he had finished, he pressed a button, and a robot-proctor entered noiselessly, received instruction and as quietly disappeared. Bejamel knew that his robot would deliver the message in person, nothing could take that plastic message from him short of destruction.

V

"TONIGHT we attack!" Guerlan persisted uncompromisingly, but his eyes sought Perlac's and found confirmation in her swift smile. "I offer the counsel of daring—all or nothing!" A roar of approval greeted his words, the echoes dwindling down the series of subterranean caverns that formed a continental link in the bowels of Neptune and was used to shelter the army of scientists, technicians, analysts, coordinators, mechanics and workmen. They were now under Columbia's Fifth Level, and rising to the crystal-plast dome, each tier was now under the domination of the Irreconcilables.

But Paulan, the Commander in Chief, arose in all the dignity of his great age. He frowned in disapproval, sighing before he spoke.

"I fear too great an army has been assembled against us, *Plastica*, *Telluria*, *Perdura*, the eleven remaining cities will have to be conquered, and remember, since we captured Columbia with comparative ease while the Inner Circle's Army was engaged in destroying the caverns beneath *Plastica*, all the other cities swarm with Intermediates and the Scientists of the First and Second Circle, not to speak of those fiends of the Inner Circle themselves. We have converted millions through the use of the *Ethero-Magnum*, thanks to our loyal Perlac, who taught us to use it as the Inner Circle used it to condition the amnesiacs; we have paralyzed the Plastic Industry; destroyed the machinery for processing *Bagazo* into the amnesiac drug, and we control all the stores of *Bagazo*. We have achieved the arming of thousands of our followers. Surely, that is a great victory. I feel that should be enough for the present; besides, the Inner Circle will want to come to terms with us."

And it was true. Hunger and privation stalked the tiers of the great cities; chaos reigned. Even the great Plastic centers now had become a shambles of exploding acid vats; conveyors bore a welter of half-asphyxiated humanity, gaunt with hunger and the spasms lack of the amnesiac brought on; transportation was paralyzed, and everywhere the amnesiacs flared into madness as the effects of the drug wore off; and in frenzy of remembrance and need

of the drug, they attacked all in the ranks of scientists, destroying everything they could lay hands on. Thousands died under the trained precision of the Intermediates, and Scientists of the First Order, but the casualties they inflicted in the serried ranks of the Chief Protector were appalling.

"A compromise is not enough!" Guarlan was pitiless. "We have but one *Ether Magnum* here in Columbia with which to carry our message to the Second Level of each city and the workmen of the Third Level. True we have close to a quarter of a million warriors, but in a war of attrition, they have the greater resources. Besides," his voice was acid with scorn, "who wants a compromise? Not I?" His great green eyes under the long dark lashes flashed fire and the generous, square-cut mouth was bitter. He pointed an accusing finger at the legion of men and women that filled to overflowing the immense central cavern.

"You have asked for enough food to insure health in your children and have been told that synthetic-parturition will take care of your offspring, as indeed it does, and you never see them again! You who have asked but a measure of happiness and have been giving all you possess in energy, loyalty and obedience, and are given in return a brutalizing drug that robs you of the will to life! You who through the intrigues and machinations of the Inner Circle have been brutally thrust into the Second, the Third and even the Fourth Levels without a trial, without a hearing merely to satisfy the sadistic minds that rule us from the City of the Sphere. . . . YOU, would you want a compromise?"

The negative roar that rose in response, shook the lofty ceiling of the cavern and was like whirlwind. When it had died down, Paulan stood up again.

"I resign," he said simply. "Younger hands than mine will have to lead you. Perhaps you're right, Guerlan, if so, take my place as Commander in Chief, my son."

For a moment there was silence, and then another multi-throated roar of approval.

Guerlan was silent before the majestic dignity of the old man, and something akin to pity welled out of his heart for the great patriarch; but Perlac was on her feet, her sculptured arms flung

above her head demanding attention from the great multitude.

"I second the nomination!" Her limpid tones carried far.

"And I . . . and I . . . and I!" Thousands of voices strove to be heard, down into the farthest reaches of the linked caverns, as those who could not see, heard through the inter-connecting teleradio.

"Then," Guerlan spoke firmly, almost coldly, "the Council of War is called to session, we will meet in the Venusian spacer. All troops stand by for orders."

"Lead, Commander!" exclaimed a rich baritone voice.

It was Carladin, winged, diminutive, proud that the first session of the Council of War should be held in his magnificent atomo-plane, the one that had been repaired in the cavern beneath Plastica. He was proud, too, of Venus' inventive genius in converting the secret electronic formula of the electro-flash into a magnification of that weapon, to the size of a cannon, and raised to the sixth power, enough to practically blast an atomo-plane out of space. As for his special gift to the cause, that was an ironic touch that only a Venusian mind was capable of conceiving, for although unbelievably kind, they never forgave. "Poetic Justice," Carladin had called it, and insisted on the use of his special gift, even bringing a battalion of Venusians to handle it.

"TELLURIA reporting . . . Telluria . . . Fourth Level cleared. Entrance to Third Level forced . . . Fighting intense . . . Telluria . . ." The voice of the announcer faded and the magnified face in the telecast dissolved before their gaze.

Guerlan, Perlac and Carladin listened intently in the control cabin of the Venusian spacer which hovered like a great bird in the darkness above Columbia.

The enormous ethero-magnum that occupied a large section of the control room, came to life again as an ascending whine warned them, it was Perdura calling:

"Perdura calling . . . Perdura . . . Commander Guerlan!"

"Come in, Perdura!" Guerlan exclaimed impatiently, his nerves taut from inaction, but plans had to be observed. "Come in!"

The shifting swirls of light on the telecast became steady and a young, pale-

featured youth could be seen speaking with great intensity.

"We're on the second level, Commander. The defense has been terrific, they're bringing robots into the battle. One electro-flash cannon destroyed thus far, but we're pushing forward. No further news."

It was disappointing. In a concerted attack in eleven cities, thousands of Irreconcilables had emerged from the bowels of Neptune, striking upwards from the fifth levels of the cities, aided by crazed amnesiacs who fought with tooth and nail when no weapons were available. But it was Plastica that worried him most, for here was the strategic city they must capture at all costs. Unable to control his impatience any longer, he asked Perlac to contact Plastica. The girl's slender fingers played over the banked keys, adjusting tiny levers and driving home the activating selectors. Swirls of magnificent colors flooded the Telecast screen, while the ascending whine of the complex instrument went beyond the auditory limits of the human ear; and presently scene after scene of ghastly destruction showed on the telecast, the fifth level came and went a shattered welter; the fourth where destruction was appalling showed great rents in the crystoplast dome that separated it from the third. There was fighting still in the second level, as isolated parties strove to decimate the remaining, fleeing Intermediates; the fallen forms of robot-proctors littered the conveyors and inter-connecting avenues, the carnage was incredible.

But it was in the first level itself where the battle without quarter was now taking place. Divisions of ordine-plastic robots charged great masses of Irreconcilables, only to be shattered in great waves as the electro-flash cannon, gift of Venus, disintegrated their electronic balance. Thousands of lurid flashes from atomo-rifles and atomo-cannons, laboriously hauled to the first level by the attackers, belched destruction at buildings laden with Intermediates and Second-Level Scientists; aerotanks with treads instead of landing gear, were attempting to settle on the vast first level, their atomo-cannon slashing at the attackers with great scimitars of lurid blue light. It was a titanic holocaust that would long live in the annals of the Universe, for Venus, Mars, Mercury and Europa

had their Tele-Magnums trained on the fantastic struggle.

And then the face of the Commander of the Irreconcilables attacking *Plastica*, showed on the Telecast, a great gash over an eye still oozing a gout of blood that trickled down the left side of his face. Grim, with an awful determination in his young eyes, the Commander spoke hoarsely. "Command *Guerlan*, we need aircraft to engage the aero-tanks. *Plastica* is surrounded without the crysto-plast dome, and thousands of Inner Circle Scientists await the precise moment to enter in their Treaders and annihilate us. In reaching the first level, our losses have been too great, Commander!" He saluted and the face withdrew, as if having delivered his message there were nothing more to be said.

"*Carladin*," *Guerlan*'s voice was vibrant with pent-up emotion, "you've brought with you eight-hundred atomo-spacers better than anything the Inner Circle has, if the speed and strength of *Perlac*'s atomo-spacer is a sample. There is *your* task!"

"NOT MINE, Commander!" There was an edge of keen delight in the superb baritone voice of the tiny, winged figure. "I also brought with me a great warrior of space to lead my fleet. I have another task I shall relish even more! In one of my spacers, the flag-ship, are the hounds of Mother Venus, with which we hunt in the great virgin forests. One to each member of a battalion of my people . . . on a fragile leash! I shall communicate with my fleet immediately, may I take one of the emergency planes?" And as *Guerlan* nodded assent, *Carladin* was gone.

Guerlan wondered what the Venusian had meant by the hounds of Venus, but he was too preoccupied with the battle to care, all that mattered was that he was willing to use his fleet in accordance with the plan.

"*Gloriana* calling . . . *Gloriana* calling Commander *Guerlan* . . ." The monotonous iteration and reiteration of the announcer demanded attention. *Perlac* touched a bank of jet black keys as *Guerlan* said:

"Come in *Gloriana*, report, we're listening!"

"*Gloriana* reports a stalemate. We have

gained second level, almost took the first, but the fleet is above the first level, we can't combat it. All levels cleared but the first. *Gloriana* sounding off."

Other reports came in, but still *Guerlan* waited for the one thing that was imperative. And at last, through an eternity of waiting, *Columbia* came on the *Ethero-Magnum*, then like bursting flowers of fire, the atomic flashes from the emerging atomo-spacers of Venus as they launched themselves straight up into the heavens through the vertical funnel-like channel that rose from the caverns, straight up into the upper reaches of the first level. Spacer after spacer soared aloft and disappeared in the direction of *Plastica*. All but the last. It rose majestically upward and then, describing a parabola in midair, began to lose altitude, its atomic flashes like falling stars.

And then began the most bizarre attack in the history of six planets, for as the fleet attacked the swarm of atomo-fighters and aero-tanks of the Inner Circle, the last Venusian spacer had landed outside *Plastica*, and a multitude of Venusians each one leading a gigantic *Calamar*, the dreaded, armored tiger of Venus, launched themselves upon the besieging Scientists of the Inner Circle that awaited the propitious moment to enter *Plastica* during the battle and destroy the Irreconcilables by an attack from their rear.

The roar of the ravenous beasts was a crescendo that drowned the wild, agonized screams of the scientists as mammoth claws ripped through plastic-breast plates and Venusian silks, and fangs found fat throats and steaming blood. Overhead the clash of the two air armadas was a holocaust of fire, as the two armies beneath fought also for supremacy on the first level.

What the outcome would be, was beyond prediction, for neither side entertained any doubt now but that it was a struggle to the death—there could be no quarter. If *Plastica* fell, most of the Empire went with it, for within it was the very life-blood of the nation—*Plastics*, the beginning, the reason and the end of their existence. For plastics were clothing and shelter, and weapons and furniture, and even medicines and synthetic concentrates that went under the name of food. Besides, they had *Columbia*, where the sustenance of the

City of the Sphere and the first levels was grown and manufactured.

Slowly at first, imperceptibly, the battle turned in their favor, objectives that seemed unattainable were reached by the Irreconcilables, and the defenders fell back. The invulnerable fleet, the much touted and dreaded air armada, as being decimated by the unearthly speed of the Venusian spacers; and Intermediates and robots alike fell before the supernal fire of the electro-flash cannon and electro-rifles. Still, the battle wore on and on, with such an intensity that it was incredible that anything that lived could endure it. Without *Plastica* itself, a horror of carnage, blasted Calamars and torn bodies, marked where the Inner Circle Reserves had been, but Caladin's spacer was nowhere in view.

"The time," Perlac said softly, "has come, my dear."

GUERLAN gazed at the exquisite features of Perlac in misery. He was silent. But the girl laid a hand on his shoulder caressingly, and forced him to look into her eyes. "We must face it, Guerlan, unless we do, this war may last for years, and oceans of blood will flow. It is the better way."

"I know, I know Perlac. But let me do it alone. I can't . . . I just can't bear to have you risk your life, my dear." Impulsively he crushed her to him in a fierce embrace and kissed the flower-like mouth. Then he released her.

"I will be in less danger than you; after all I am Bejamel's daughter. And don't you think that I, too, could not bear to have you go alone? No, dear, we are in this together, for life or for death."

As if the gods of war relished the appalling daring of their plan, suddenly the way was opened to them, for on the immense Tele-Magnum, the heavenly tones of Bejamel's voice could be heard, as slowly, his gargoyle face came into view. Hurriedly Perlac threw the switch which prevented him at the Palace on the Sphere from seeing them.

"Commander Guerlan! Bejamel, Minister of Justice, speaks." There were rich undertones of irony, and bitterness, too, in the superlative voice of the speaker.

"I have learned that my daughter is your prisoner. We have captured important

prisoners, too. Paulan, your ex-leader, and that misguided Martian who has chosen to espouse your cause. But all this is of no moment, I am willing to ransom my daughter on your own terms, barbarian!" Even in his grief, Bejamel was unable to suppress the insulting epithet.

"What do you offer, Bejamel?" Guerlan spoke calmly, although a seething maelstrom swirled within him. "But make your offer worth listening to, I have no time for barter."

"A thousand prisoners of war, and a coffer of jewels, Guerlan!"

Guerlan laughed shortly. "Your fame for sagacity has been overrated, Bejamel, the jewels . . . we shall shortly make our own—The Ultimate Presence knows there will be enough dead when this is over. As for the prisoners," his voice became indifferent, "we'll take them, of course, but we have more men than we need, Scientist. Offer me something beyond my means and I'll send your daughter to you, unharmed!"

"Speak, Dissenter, I am a man of reason!" Bejamel's voice was filled with cunning. "Speak!"

"Since you are the only one who can open His Benevolence's doors, outside of the mechanism he can activate from within, destroy the mechanism. Take away his invulnerable robe of force, and then . . . then forget to sing! Let him starve slowly in his enchanted garden, after he has devoured all his birds and pets." Guerlan's laughter was mocking. But within he was tense with anxiety. Would his strategy win, he wondered? One could not deal in a normal manner with Bejamel.

"Agreed!" The celestial voice had risen to limpid heights.

The fleets of atomo-spacers and aero-tanks stood poised, withdrawn, marking an invisible, aerial lane through which hurtled the slim, silver flash of an atomo-plane. The most powerful Tele-Magnum in the palace of His Benevolence was focused on that ship, without pause, until every detail of its interior was exposed on the great tele-screen at the palace. But its interior revealed only the pale, haggard face of Perlac, inexpressibly lovely in its sadness, and motionless beside her, the gigantic robot-proctor of bery-plastic, embossed with the insignia of the House of Justice

and Bejamel's own intricate emblem. It had been sent to act as a guard and bring her unharmed to the palace.

Forming a perfect target, a trio of transports carrying a thousand Irreconcilables, prisoners of war, came from the opposite direction, released from the City of the Sphere, as per agreement. The vessels neared each other, crossed and passed enroute to their opposite destinations. At last, Perlac's plane reached the outer air-locks of the Sphere, where pressure was adjusted, and entering ships were guided to their berths at the base of the immense globe, where the machinery of the anti-gravity repulsor beams was housed also, and where the glittering tiers rose upward to end at the great Hanging Gardens of His Benevolence, where the palace stood.

And then the armistice was broken. Hundreds of swift, deadly interceptor planes, atomo-powered, dived after the retreating transport; tremendous aero-tanks rushed in for the kill spewing a blaze of livid radiations. One of the transports managed to dive into the inter-connecting, ascending and descending chamber of the city, but the others, trapped, rather than be rayed like sheep, courageously turned and fought. But to no avail. Outside the tropical city of Columbia, they crashed in great flaming gouts, like miniature volcanoes.

A HEAD of Perlac and her robot-proctor was the City of the Sphere. Majestically it blazed like a cosmic jewel against the impenetrably-black backdrop of space. It grew immense, fantastic, like a minor planet glowing in space, but suddenly, their speed slackened as the robot-control began to decelerate; and presently they slid with a vast hiss into the first airlock, where the synchronized magnetic fields instantly checked their speed. A terrific force jarred them until their bones seem to melt, then doors were opening, voices could be heard shouting orders, and the official pilot entered the ship and with an obsequious salute to the girl, he took seat at the controls and guided the ship into the second lock.

The entire length of both the first and second locks were lined with the titanic coils of the synchronized, magnetic degravitation fields, which stopped the vessels in a graduating net of force. But the trans-

parent sides of the sphere gave a curious sensation of lack of solidity, of fragility even, as if they had entered a vast hall of glass. Only those who really knew the secret composition of the Sphere, were aware of its near-invulnerability, even beyond that of the strongest known metal-alloys.

At last the long, slim atomo-plane was berthed, and the tall, cadaverous figure of Bejamel hove into view. He waited for Perlac closely followed by her robot guard to approach him, in accordance with the etiquette of *Plastica*. Then, unable to suppress any longer the profound emotions that stirred his complex being, he opened his arms wide and rushed forward to enfold the only being he had ever loved, in the fragile embrace of his skeletal arms. A suspicious brilliance swam in the long green eyes, and the ordinarily limpid voice was husky, uncertain, as he exclaimed: "Perlac, O my dear!" He could say no more. Perlac was touched. She brushed her lips against his cheek, then she gently pushed him back, to gaze into the inscrutable green eyes of the Minister of Justice, who was also her father.

Behind her, looming unnoticed, as a piece of activated mechanism, was the Robot-Proctor, both servant and guard.

"Father," she said impulsively, "Don't take me to the Palace! I couldn't bear to enter the temple as one of the Virgins . . . rather would I prefer to be a prisoner of the Irreconcilables."

Father and daughter gazed at each other in silence, surrounded by the deep, far-away hum of the throbbing generators as the incredible stream of atomic power fought the gravity of Neptune. Great opaque doors at the far end of the second lock led into the inner chambers where the robot-tended machinery never faltered for a second. Bejamel smiled slowly, ironically, and shook his head. "We're not going there!"

He waved an emaciated hand at the guard of honor that awaited his pleasure at a respectful distance, and instantly the Intermediate Officer in charge came forward. "Command!" he said laconically. It was the same officer that had reported the defeat of the Intermediate battalion in the caverns beneath *Plastica*. His superbly beautiful face was impassive, but the bril-

liant eyes were restless, as if the creature's nerves were overwrought.

"My atomocopter!" Bejamel said as laconically, and then passed a small package to the Intermediate. "For you and the entire Palace Guard," he said softly. "There will be no need of you and your men tonight. We have all but won . . . celebrate."

The light of hunger, of delight, of the nearest feeling akin to gratitude he could possibly feel, flashed like a flame into the Intermediate's eyes. "I bow in thanks, O Lord of Justice," he replied formally.

Within seconds, they were speeding upwards in Bejamel's private atomocopter, past tier after tier of the fabulous City of the Sphere.

VI

EVERY tier was a beehive of activity, as scientists of the Inner Circle, scurried in every direction engaged in a multitude of tasks. Atomo-planes flashed through the inter-connecting levels on their way to the titanic battle below. Thousands of the Neophytes, aided by robots, supplied arms and concentrates to the departing vessels, while other thousands boarded them on their way to swell the ranks of the defenders, and take the place of their countless dead.

At last they reached Bejamel's private dwelling. He never called it a palace. In the tenebrous depths of his involved soul, there were flashes of genius, and one of them was to have and to rule without ever mentioning the fact. His dwelling was exquisite in proportions, the simplicity of its white *Jadite* facade, depending on the artistry of its composition and carved decors, not on opulence of mosaic-jewelling as was the case with the palace of His Benevolence. A repugnance of rococo display was enough to deter him from bad taste.

They went immediately into his private chambers, and here Perlac had a great surprise, for reclining on a dais covered with silvery Venusian furs and the priceless plumage of the Martian Kra, was the one person she would never have expected to see—Estrella, favorite of His Benevolence!

Once over her shock, Perlac turned and

favoured her ancient father with a sly smile.

"Incredible!" she murmured. "Can it be possible?" Bejamel bridled.

"Why not?" He rose to his full, cadaverous height. "Estrella and I are going to Venus, child, I have yet many more years of life, and loneliness is not good for an active mind like mine. That's why I ransomed you from that barbarian Guerlan, so that you may go with us. I am going to the palace now, I have one final errand to accomplish well, before we leave!" He smiled slowly, satirically, as if the most delicious thought in the universe had taken shape in his mind.

"Did you take care of His Exalted Benevolence's power-screen belt, my dear?" he inquired of Estrella.

"Yes," the girl nodded, her eyes filling with hatred at the mention of the dreaded name. "It will never function again!"

"Then," Bejamel said emphatically, in the tones he used when he had delivered the final word, "meet me at the emergency outer lock. My ship is there waiting, robot-manned, provisioned, containing fortunes in jewels and priceless things. We will go to Venus, and to a new . . . a greater life!" he exclaimed, his eyes shining on the reclining form of Estrella. "I shall expect to see you, Perlac, with Estrella aboard my ship within one hour!" And to the silent robot-proctor. "Guard the women," he said directing a tiny beam of force from the microscopic mechanism concealed in his ring of office at the forehead of the robot, which instantly sealed the order within the synthetic brain of the metal-plastic man. "Guard them and bring them to my ship within one hour."

The metal-plastic robot seemed to stiffen, his great non-abradable crystal eyes gleamed and a powerful arm went up in acknowledgment of the peremptory order. Satisfied, Bejamel turned and left.

It was then that Perlac turned to the towering robot and said softly, "Now!" And to Estrella, who watched uncomprehendingly. "Are you ready? Throw something about you, and veil your face, Estrella, we're going to the space ship!"

"But we've still got a lot of time!" the favorite protested. "It's true that most of my things are on the spacer, but I want to arrange some personal matters before we go; wait a while!"

A tremendous power was in Perlac's voice as she replied:

"We're leaving now!" Yet she said it very softly. "You're dripping with jewels, are you taking those things with you?"

"But of course! Such a question, have you gone mad?"

"You know what they are? Each one represents a life . . . they're made from organic-plastic, human beings executed by greed!" Perlac reminded her.

BUT Estrella shrugged her divine shoulders as she arose. "My not wearing them wouldn't help those slain ones now. Besides, they're nearer to me in death, than they could ever have been in life!" She smiled with incredible vanity. She threw a robe of Kra plumes about her, and allowed herself to be led to the atomocopter.

Within seconds they were speeding to the outer lock and Bejamel's ship. It was there that the robot-proctor left them, and hurried to the lower chamber where the pulsing generators sang their eternal threnody of unlimited power. Unnoticed he gained the great metal-plastic doors that divided the vast chambers from the anti-gravity repulsor machinery. Unhesitatingly, it directed a thin pencil of force at an orifice slightly above the center of the great doors, just as Perlac had explained over and over, and the massive portals parted slowly, remaining open.

Robots of the lower grades worked among the maze of towering machinery, oiling, testing, doing a multitude of tasks. But the robot-proctor, without paying them any attention, seemed to suddenly open at the side and an electro-flash gun, of large size, magnified by the Venusian scientists and raised to many times its normal power, came into view from the aperture. Without making a sound, without even a beam of light, the fatal weapon was aimed at the very heart of the colossal motors and generators, wheel and pistons seemed to warp, shrink and disappear uncannily; the steady throbbing hum of the degravitator, lost its smooth rhythm and thereafter large sections of machinery disappeared under the relentless action of the supernal fire being directed at them.

Instantly the robots came to life, for a

moment they milled wildly, as if this supreme emergency were something they were not able to cope with, and then they saw the new robot in their midst. Their synthetic brains activated only to the repair and maintenance of the machines, and to their safeguard, focused on the attacker, and its removal was instantly their immediate task. They attacked *en masse*, but the robot-proctor eluded them among the mazes of metal-plastic, of berylo-plastic rods and generators, and the tremendous motors which were being eaten by an invisible leprosy. With a swift slash of the electro-flash gun, the robot-proctor caused havoc among the robots that pursued him, legs, arms, even heads wavered and disappeared as the electronic balance was completely disrupted by the flash.

A tremor seemed to shake the gigantic Sphere. By now, the great degravitator chamber was in shambles, and the remaining motors were unable to cope with the awful pressure of the gravity of the giant planet.

With one final murderous sweep of the electro-flash, that seemed to shear like an invisible scimitar through machinery, robots and everything in its path, retreated as it had come, racing upwards towards the Sphere's emergency locks. There was no apparent pursuit. Only the vivid scarlet lights of imperative emergency, flooding what had been the degravitator chamber were witnesses to the destruction.

In the coordinating offices of the Maintenance Scientists, the telesolidographs gave three-dimensional accounts of the wreckage. But even there, confusion, bred by a growing panic, caused a delay, losing them their chance of effecting repairs. Suddenly, panic brooked no obstacles. The light of intelligence and logic was flung aside as men and women becoming aware of the ghastly fate that awaited them, poured out on the various levels in a frenzy to escape. The news of the destruction of vital machinery in the anti-gravity repulsor beam chamber was being relayed everywhere.

Already the colossal Sphere was swaying gently and settling lower, dislocating the delicate balances that held it poised in space. The stresses on the plastic structures and pylons was tremendous.

AS THE robot arrived at Bejamel's spacer, a dramatic scene unfolded before his huge non-abradable eyes. Holding an electro-flash in her slender hand, her eyes brimming with tears, Perlac seemed to have for the moment at least, control of the superb ship. She was saying:

"We don't leave here until Guerlan returns!" Her lips were white, but the sheer determination written in her lovely face, held even Bejamel who was taken aback.

"Guerlan! Are you mad, Perlac? That barbarian's below on the planet's surface!"

"On the contrary," the robot-proctor spoke in a voice leaden with fatigue, "I'm here, Bejamel." Slowly he emerged from the enclosing plastic shell of what had been a robot, then let the huge, hollow plastic man fall clattering to the spacer's floor. Silently he searched the ex-Minister of Justice, who seemed transfixed by a vast surprise. From under Bajamel's arm-pit, Guerlan took a hidden electro-flash, and a venom-tipped dagger concealed in a fold of his tunic. Having drawn his fangs, he smiled. "We can blast off now . . . but not for Venus!"

Majestically, Bejamel turned to Perlac with an inscrutable smile. He gazed at the girl in a mixture of bitterness and admiration:

"You're indeed *my* daughter!" he said at last. Then to Guerlan: "What do you propose to do with me?"

"Keep you in Neptune," Guerlan replied bluntly. "Utilize your vast knowledge of jurisprudence, and your personal and intimate knowledge of the thousands of scientists who are certain to surrender sooner or later. Human beings have inalienable rights, rights that we propose to return to them. But unfortunately, it will not be easy to give freedom to those who have never known what freedom it. We will need all the science and power of mind available. So, Bejamel, we must use you—under our supervision, of course. You see, even the venom of a cobra is eminently useful, if handled right!"

They eyed each other, these two. Both powerful, dominating intellects, both capable of profound emotions. It was the older man, who used to the devious ways of the Sphere and His Benevolence's court, yielded gracefully. Bejamel glanced at Estrella, and it occurred to him that what-

ever years of life remained to him would be sweet if she were at his side. At that instant, a vast tremor shook the gigantic city of the Sphere, and Bejamel's eyes went wide.

Seated at the controls, Guerlan turned slightly to Bejamel. "Give your Intermediates orders to open the lock and activate the catapult—we have minutes, perhaps only seconds, before the Sphere gives under the gravity pull. Make your choice, or I give the ship full power and crash through the airlock, Bejamel!" Guerlan's vice was cold, impassive.

"I shall give the order," Bejamel assented in a brittle voice.

FROM a vantage point in space, the scene that met their eyes had the memorable quality of those stupendous spectacles of nature that human eyes rarely if ever are privileged to see.

The vast sphere was aflame with color, dazzling in the vivid coruscations of blue and orange and mauve and yellow lights. Spinning slowly, it was a thing of unearthly beauty, a floating, starry globe that might have been a toy of the gods. It was being deserted by every type of craft imaginable; hundreds of planes, 'copters, electros . . . every available type of ship that could evacuate the jostling, crying, screaming thousands who had jammed the outer airlocks and emergency exits.

Inexorably, the Sphere sank lower and lower, as the remaining generators fought the awful gravity of Neptune that held the doomed globe in its gigantic grip. Enough power still remained to the incredible sphere to keep it from crashing headlong into the furious waters of the vast ocean below. But at last, as if the ultimate ounce of power were gone, the Globe seemed to lurch in a glory of prismatic lights, then with terrific momentum it began the dizzy plunge through space, whirling like a falling meteor.

Percal, Bejamel, Estrella—even Guerlan himself, could not take their eyes from the tragic glory that was the sphere. Suddenly they saw it illuminate the ocean for miles as it neared the surface of the waters, then with a vast splash that sent a tidal wave licking the shore's hills hungrily, it sank into the cold, green waters.

"And there it will remain for all

eternity!" Guerlan said thoughtfully. "A tomb of evil, that men might live!"

Bejamel was silent. The gargoyle's face was softened by a profound sadness. He sighed like a man who has lived too much, and at last seeks rest. He turned his back to the scene below as if unable to bear it any more. "An epoch has passed," he said softly in the magnificent voice.

But Guerlan was at the Tele-Magnum, broadcasting offer of an armistice to the warring armadas below.

"Scientists of the Inner Circle and the First Level," he said with infinite assurance. "Your City of the Sphere has plunged to its doom, and, with it went His Infamous Benevolence and hundreds of thousands of your henchmen. You no longer have a haven of refuge, no base in which to refuel or obtain supplies. When your present ammunition is gone, when repairs and food are necessary, and when the men who die must be replaced, there is no spot where you can return. Yours is a certain doom—unless you unconditionally

surrender. We offer a pardon to all who are willing to join our cause; lay down your arms and aid in the reconstruction—a far more glorious future is before us!"

An immense weariness had etched lines about his mouth and eyes, and his shoulders slumped as if a great reaction had set in. But his eyes could still flame with joy, as he saw the deadly fleet of the Inner Circle abandon the struggle, as he saw the embattled armies cease their carnage. As he turned from the Tele-Magnum to go to the controls and guide the ship to their base in Columbia, he suddenly felt soft arms entwine around his neck and a soft face that pressed close to his. He didn't even need to look, the fragrance of Venusian jasmynes was in his nostrils and a warm, flower-like mouth pressed close to his.

It was then that Bejamel turned to Estrella and was eyeing him with critical eyes and said sardonically:

"Shall we make it unanimous?"

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Planet Stories' Off-Trail Tale

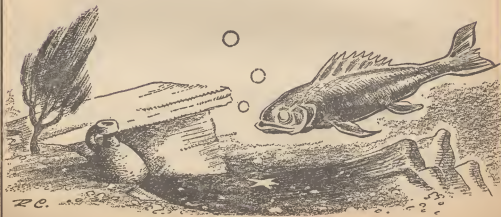
TERROR OUT OF SPACE

An eerie story of a silver land beneath the black Venusian seas. A grim tale of brooding terror whirling out of space to drive men mad, of a menace without name or form, and of the man, Lundy, who fought the horror, his eyes blinded by his will. For to see the terror was to become its slave—a mindless automaton whose only wish was to see behind the shadowed mysterious eyelids of "IT".



A WEIRD BRACKETTALE OF A SPACE FRONTIER

by
LEIGH BRACKETT



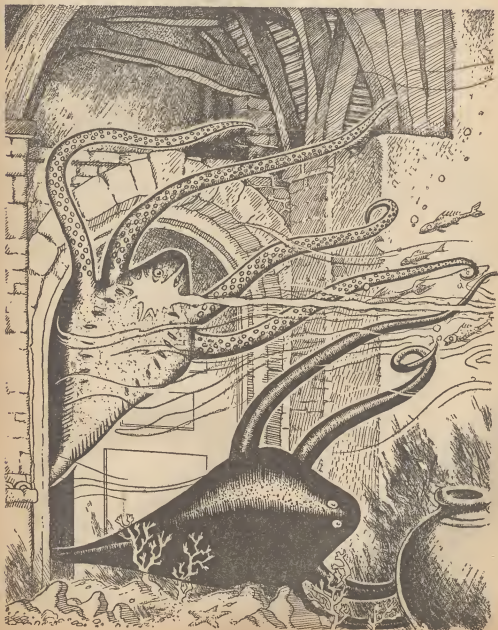
TERROR OUT OF SPACE

By

LEIGH BRACKETT

One of the greatest science-fantasies of the year.

Illustration by CLYNE



LUNDY was flying the aero-space convertible by himself. He'd been doing it for a long time. So long that the bottom half of him was dead to the toes and the top half even deader, except for two separate aches like ulcerated teeth; one in his back, one in his head.

Thick pearly-grey Venusian sky went past the speeding flier in streamers of torn cloud. The rockets throbbed and pounded. Instruments jerked erratically under the

swirl of magnetic currents that makes the Venusian atmosphere such a swell place for pilots to go nuts in.

Jackie Smith was still out cold in the co-pilot's seat. From in back, beyond the closed door to the tiny inner cabin, Lundy could hear Farrell screaming and fighting.

He'd been screaming a long time. Ever since the shot of *avertin* Lundy had given him after he was taken had begun to wear thin. Fighting the straps and



Lundy fired the last shot in his gun.

screaming, a hoarse jarring sound with no sense in it.

Screaming to be free, because of *It*.

Somewhere inside of Lundy, inside the crumpled, sweat-soaked black uniform of the Tri-World Police, Special Branch, and the five-foot-six of thick springy muscle under it, there was a knot. It was a large knot, and it was very, very cold in spite of the sweltering heat in the cabin, and it had a nasty habit of yanking itself tight every few minutes, causing Lundy to jerk and sweat as though he'd been spiked.

Lundy didn't like that cold tight knot in his belly. It meant he was afraid. He'd been afraid before, plenty of times, and he wasn't ashamed of it. But right now he needed all the brains and guts he had to get *It* back to Special headquarters at Vhia, and he didn't want to have to fight himself, too.

Fear can screw things for you. It can make you weak when you need to be strong, if you're going to go on living. You, and the two other guys depending on you.

Lundy hoped he could keep from getting too much afraid, and too tired—because *It* was sitting back there in its little strong-box in the safe, waiting for somebody to crack.

Farrell was cracked wide open, of course, but he was tied down. Jackie Smith had begun to show signs before he passed out, so that Lundy had kept one hand over the anaesthetic needle gun holstered on the side of his chair. And Lundy thought,

The hell of it is, you don't know when It starts to work on you. There's no set pattern, or if there is we don't know it. Maybe right now the readings I see on those dials aren't there at all . . .

Down below the torn grey clouds he could see occasional small patches of ocean. The black, still, tideless water of Venus, that covers so many secrets of the planet's past.

It didn't help Lundy any. It could be right or wrong, depending on what part of the ocean it was—and there was no way to tell. He hoped nothing would happen to the motors. A guy could get awfully wet, out in the middle of that still black water.

Farrell went on screaming. His throat seemed to be lined with impervium.

Screaming and fighting the straps, because *It* was locked up and calling for help.

Jackie Smith stirred slightly, groaned, and opened his pale green eyes.

"I'm cold," he said. "Hi, Midget."

Lundy turned his head. Normally he had a round, fresh, merry face, with bright dark eyes and a white, small-boyish grin. Now he looked like something the waiter had swept out from under a table at four A.M. on New Year's Day.

"You're cold," he said sourly. He licked sweat off his lips. "Oh, fine! That was all I needed."

Jackie Smith stirred slightly, groaned, to joggle himself. His black tunic was open over his chest, showing the white strapping of bandages, and his left hand was thrust in over the locked top of the tunic's zipper. He was a big man, not any older than Lundy, with big, ugly, pleasant features, a shock of coarse pale hair, and a skin like old leather.

"On Mercury, where I was born," he said, "the climate is suitable for human beings. You Old-World pantywaists . . ." He broke off, turned white under the leathery burn, and said through set teeth, "Oi! Farrell sure did a good job on me."

"You'll live," said Lundy. He tried not to think about how nearly both he and Smith had come to not living. Farrell had put up one hell of a fight, when they caught up with him in a native village high up in the Mountains of White Cloud.

LUNDY still felt sick about that. The bull-meat, the hard boys, you didn't mind kicking around. But Farrell wasn't that kind. He was just a nice guy that got trapped by something too big for him.

A nice guy, crazy blind in love with somebody that didn't exist. A decent hard-working guy with a wife and two kids who'd lost his mind, heart, and soul to a Thing from outer space, so that he was willing to kill to protect *It*.

Oh, hell! thought Lundy wearily, *won't he ever stop screaming?*

The rockets beat and thundered. The torn grey sky whipped past. Jackie Smith sat rigid, with closed eyes, white around the lips and breathing in shallow, careful gasps. And Vhia was still a long way off.

Maybe farther off than he knew. May-

be he wasn't heading toward *Whia* at all. Maybe *It* was working on him, and he'd never know it till he crashed.

The cold knot tightened in his belly like a cold blade stabbing.

Lundy cursed. Thinking things like that was a sure way to punch your ticket right straight to blazes.

But you couldn't help thinking, about *It*. The Thing you had caught in a special net of tight-woven metal mesh, aiming at something Farrell could see but you couldn't. The Thing you had forced into the glassite box and covered up with a black cloth, because you had been warned not to look at *It*.

Lundy's hands tingled and burned, not unpleasantly. He could still feel the small savage Thing fighting him, hidden in the net. It had felt vaguely cylindrical, and terribly alive.

Life. Life from outer space, swept out of a cloud of cosmic dust by the gravitic pull of Venus. Since Venus had hit the cloud there had been a wave of strange madness on the planet. Madness like Farrell's, that had led to murder, and some things even worse.

Scientists had some ideas about that life from Out There. They'd had a lucky break and found one of The Things, dead, and there were vague stories going around of a crystalline-appearing substance that wasn't really crystal, about three inches long and magnificently etched and fluted, and supplied with some odd little gadgets nobody would venture an opinion about.

But the Thing didn't do them much good, dead. They had to have one alive, if they were going to find out what made it tick and learn how to put a stop to what the telecommentators had chosen to call The Madness from Beyond, or The Vampire Lure.

One thing about it everybody knew. The guys who suddenly went sluggish and charged off the rails all made it clear that they had met the ultimate Dream Woman of all women and all dreams. Nobody else could see her, but that didn't bother them any. They saw her, and she was—*She*. And her eyes were always veiled.

And *She* was a whiz at hypnosis and mind-control. That's why *She*, or *It*, hadn't been caught alive before. Not before Lundy and Smith, with every scien-

tific aid Special could give them, had tracked down Farrell and managed to get the breaks.

The breaks. Plain fool luck. Lundy moved his throbbing head stiffly on his aching neck, blinked sweat out of his blood-shot eyes, and wished to hell he was home in bed.

Jackie Smith said suddenly, "Midget, I'm cold. Get me a blanket."

Lundy looked at him. His pale green eyes were half open, but not as though they saw anything. He was shivering.

"I can't leave the controls, Jackie."

"Nuts. I've got one hand. I can hang onto this lousy tin fish that long."

LUNDY scowled. He knew Smith wasn't kidding about the cold. The temperatures on Mercury made the first-generation colonists sensitive to anything below the range of an electric furnace. With the wound and all, Smith might wind up with pneumonia if he wasn't covered.

"Okay." Lundy reached out and closed the switch marked A. "But I'll let Mike do the flying. He can probably last five minutes before he blows his guts out."

Iron Mike was just a patty cake when it came to Venusian atmosphere flying. The constant magnetic compensation heated the robot coils to the fusing point in practically no time at all.

Lundy thought fleetingly that it was nice to know there were still a couple of things men could do better than machinery.

He got up, feeling like something that had stood outside rusting for four hundred years or so. Smith didn't turn his head. Lundy growled at him.

"Next time, sonny, you wear your long woolen undies and let me alone!"

Then he stopped. The knot jerked tight in his stomach. Cold sweat needled him, and his nerves stung in a swift rush of fire.

Farrell had quit screaming.

There was silence in the ship. Nothing touched it. The rockets were outside it and didn't matter. Even Jackie Smith's careful breathing had stopped. Lundy went forward slowly, toward the door. Two steps.

It opened. Lundy stopped again, quite still.

Farrell was standing in the opening. A

nice guy with a wife and two kids. His face still looked like that, but the eyes in it were not sane, nor even human.

Lundy had tied him down to the bunk with four heavy straps. Breast, belly, thighs, and feet. The marks of them were on Farrell. They were cut into his shirt and pants, into his flesh and sinew, deep enough to show his bare white ribs. There was blood. A lot of blood. Farrell didn't mind.

"I broke the straps," he said. He smiled at Lundy. "She called me and I broke the straps."

He started to walk to the safe in the corner of the cabin. Lundy gagged and pulled himself up out of a cold black cloud and got his feet to moving.

Jackie Smith said quietly, "Hold it, Midget. She doesn't like it there in the safe. She's cold, and she wants to come out."

LUNDY looked over his shoulder. Smith was hunched around in his seat, holding the needle-gun from Lundy's holster on the pilot's chair. His pale green eyes had a distant, dreamy glow, but Lundy knew better than to trust it.

He said, without inflection, "You've seen her."

"No. No, but—I've heard her." Smith's heavy lips twitched and parted. The breath sucked through between them, hoarse and slow.

Farrell went down on his knees beside the safe. He put his hands on its blank and gleaming face and turned to Lundy. He was crying.

"Open it. You've got to open it. She wants to come out. She's frightened."

Jackie Smith raised the gun, a fraction of an inch. "Open it, Midget," he whispered. "She's cold in there."

Lundy stood still. The sweat ran on him and he was colder than a frog's belly in the rain; and for no reason at all he said thickly,

"No. She's hot. She can't breathe in there. She's hot."

Then he jerked his head up and yelled. He came around to face Smith, unsteady but fast, and started for him.

Smith's ugly face twisted as though he might be going to cry. "Midget! I don't want to shoot you. Open the safe!"

Lundy said, "You damned fool," with no voice at all, and went on.

Smith hit the firing stud.

The anaesthetic needles hit Lundy across the chest. They didn't hurt much. Just a stinging prick. He kept going. No reason. It was just something he seemed to be doing at the time.

Behind him Farrell whimpered once like a puppy and lay down across the little safe. He didn't move again. Lundy got down on his hands and knees and reached in a vague sort of way for the controls. Jackie Smith watched him with dazed green eyes.

Quite suddenly, Iron Mike blew his guts out.

The control panel let go a burst of blue flame. The glare and heat of it knocked Lundy backward. Things hissed and snarled and ran together, and the convertible began to dance like a leaf in a gale. The automatic safety cut the rockets dead.

The ship began to fall.

Smith said something that sounded like *She* and folded up in his chair. Lundy rubbed his hand across his face. The lines of it were blurred and stupid. His dark eyes had no sense in them.

He began to crawl over the lurching floor toward the safe.

The clouds outside ripped and tore across the ship's nose, and presently only water showed. Black, still, tideless water dotted with little islands of floating weed that stirred and slithered with a life of their own.

Black water, rushing up.

Lundy didn't care. He crawled through Farrell's blood, and he didn't care about that, either. He pushed Farrell's body back against the cabin wall and began to scratch at the shiny door, making noises like a hound shut out and not happy about it.

The ship hit the water with a terrific smack. Spray geysered up, dead white against the black sea, fell back, and closed in. Presently even the ripples went away.

Dark green weed-islands twined sinuously upon themselves, a flock of small sea-dragons flapped their jeweled wings down and began to fish, and none of them cared at all about the ship sinking away under them.

Not even Lundy cared, out cold in the space-tight cabin, with his body wedged

up against the safe and tears drying with the sweat on his stubbled cheeks.

II

THE first thing Lundy knew about was the stillness. A dead feeling, as though everything in creation had stopped breathing.

The second thing was his body. It hurt like hell, and it was hot, and it didn't like the thick, foul air it was getting. Lundy pushed himself into a sitting position and tried to boot his brain into action. It was hard work, because someone had split his head open four ways with an axe.

It wasn't really dark in the cabin. A wavering silver glow almost like moonlight came in through the ports. Lundy could see pretty well. He could see Farrell's body sprawled out on the floor, and a mess of junk that had once been equipment.

He could see the safe.

He looked at it a long time. There wasn't much to look at. Just an open safe with nothing in it, and a piece of black cloth dropped on the floor.

"Oh, Lord," whispered Lundy. "Oh, my Lord!"

Everything hit him at once then. There wasn't much in him but his stomach, and that was tied down. But it tried hard to come up. Presently the spasms stopped, and then Lundy heard the knocking.

It wasn't very loud. It had a slow, easy rhythm, as though the knocker had a lot of time and didn't care when he got in. It came from the airlock panel.

Lundy got up. Slowly, cold as a toad's belly and as white. His lips drew back from his teeth and stayed there, frozen.

The knocking kept on. A sleepy kind of sound. The guy outside could afford to wait. Sometime that locked door was going to open, and he could wait. He wasn't in a hurry. He would never be in a hurry.

Lundy looked all around the cabin. He didn't speak. He looked sideways out of the port. There was water out there. The black sea-water of Venus; clear and black, like deep night.

There was level sand spreading away from the ship. The silver light came up out of it. Some kind of phosphorescence, as bright as moonlight and faintly tinged with green.

Black sea-water. Silver sand. The guy kept on knocking at the door. Slow and easy. Patient. One—two. One—two. Just off beat with Lundy's heart.

Lundy went to the inner cabin, walking steadily. He looked around carefully and then went back. He stopped by the lock panel.

"Okay, Jackie," he said. "In a minute. In a minute, boy."

Then he turned and went very fast to the port locker and got a quart bottle out of its shock cradle, and raised it. It took both hands.

After a while he dropped the bottle and stood still, not looking at anything, until he stopped shaking. Then he pulled his vac-suit down off its hook and climbed into it. His face was grey and quite blank.

He took all the oxygen cylinders he could carry, emergency rations, and all the benzadrine in the medicine kit. He put the limit dose of the stimulant down on top of the brandy before he locked his helmet. He didn't bother with the needle gun. He took the two Service blasters—his own, and Smith's. The gentle knocking didn't stop.

He stood for a moment looking at the open safe and the black cloth dropped beside it. Something cruel came into his face. A tightness, a twitching and setting of the muscles, and a terrible look of patience.

Being under water wouldn't bother a Thing from outer space. He reached up and lifted the net of tight-woven metal-mesh down off its hook and fastened it on his belt. Then he walked over and opened the airlock door.

Black water swirled in around his weighted boots, and then the door opened wide and Jackie Smith came in.

He'd been waiting in the flooded lock chamber. Kicking his boots against the inner door, easy, with the slow breathing of the sea. Now the water pushed his feet down and held him upright from behind, so he could walk in and stand looking at Lundy. A big blond man with green eyes, and white bandages strapped under his open black tunic, looking at Lundy. Not long. Only for a second. But long enough.

Lundy stopped himself after the third

scream. He had to, because he knew if he screamed again he'd never stop. By that time the black water had pushed Jackie Smith away, over to the opposite wall, and covered his face.

"Oh, Lord," whispered Lundy. "Oh Lord, *what did he see before he drowned?*"

No one answered. The black water pushed at Lundy, rising high around him, trying to take him over to Jackie Smith. Lundy's mouth began to twitch.

He shut his teeth on his lower lip, holding it, holding his throat. He began to run, clumsily, fighting the water, and then he stopped that, too. He walked, not looking behind him, out into the flooded lock. The door slid shut behind him, automatically.

He walked out across the firm green-silver sand, swallowing the blood that ran in his mouth and choked him.

HE DIDN'T hurry. He was going to be walking for a long, long time. From the position of the ship when it fell he ought to be able to make it to the coast—unless It had been working on him so the figures on the dials hadn't been there at all.

He checked his direction, adjusted the pressure-control in his vac-suit, and plodded on in the eerie undersea moonlight. It wasn't hard going. If he didn't hit a deep somewhere, or meet something too big to handle, or furnish a meal for some species of hungry Venus-weed, he ought to live to face up to the Old Man at H.Q. and tell him two men were dead, the ship lost, and the job messed to hell and gone.

It was beautiful down there. Like the dream-worlds you see when you're doped or delirious. The phosphorescence rose up into the black water and danced there in wavering whorls of cold fire. Fish, queer gaudy little things with jewelled eyes, flicked past Lundy in darts of sudden color, and there were great stands of weed like young forests, spangling the dark water and the phosphorescent glow with huge burning spots of blue and purple and green and silver.

Flowers. Lundy got too close to some of them once. They reached out and opened round mouths full of spines and

sucked at him hungrily. The fish gave them a wide berth. After that, so did Lundy.

He hadn't been walking more than half an hour when he hit the road.

It was a perfectly good road, running straight across the sand. Here and there it was cracked, with some of the huge square blocks pushed up or tipped aside, but it was still a good road, going somewhere.

Lundy stood looking at it with cold prickles running up and down his spine. He'd heard about things like this. Nobody knew an awful lot about Venus yet. It was a young, tough, be-damned-to-you planet, and it was apt to give the snoopy scientific guys a good swift boot in their store teeth.

But even a young planet has a long past, and stories get around. Legends, songs, folk tales. It was pretty well accepted that a lot of Venus that was under water now hadn't been once, and vice versa. The old girl had her little whimsies while doing the preliminary mock-up of her permanent face.

So once upon a time this road had crossed a plain under a hot pearl-grey sky, going somewhere. Taking caravans from the seacoast, probably. Bales of spices and spider-silk and casks of *vakhi* from the Nahali canebrakes, and silver-haired slave-girls from the high lands of the Cloud People, going along under sultry green *liha*-trees to be sold.

Now it crossed a plain of glowing sand under still black water. The only trees that shadowed it were tall weeds with brilliant, hungry flowers, and the only creatures that followed it were little fish with jewelled eyes. But it was still there, still ready, still going somewhere.

It was headed the same way Lundy was. It must have made a bend somewhere and turned to meet him. Lundy licked cold sweat off his lips and stepped out on it.

He stepped slow and careful, like a man coming alone down the aisle of an empty church.

He walked on the road for a long time. The weeds crowded in thicker along its edges. It seemed to run right through a dense forest of them that spread away as far as Lundy could see on either side. He

was glad of the road. It was wide, and if he stayed in the middle of it the flowers couldn't reach him.

IT GOT darker, because of the weeds covering the sand. Whatever made the phosphorescence didn't like being crowded that way, and pretty soon it was so dark that Lundy had to switch on the light in the top of his helmet. In the edges of the beam he could see the weed fronds moving lazily with the slow breathing of the sea.

The flowers were brighter here. They hung like lamps in the black water, burning with a light that seemed to come out of themselves. Sullen reds and angry yellows, and coldly vicious blues.

Lundy didn't like them:

The weeds grew in thicker and closer. They bulged out from their roots, in over the stone edges. The flowers opened their bright hungry mouths and yearned at Lundy, reaching.

Reaching. Not quite touching. Not yet.

He was tired. The brandy and the benzedrine began to die in him. He changed his oxygen cylinder. That helped, but not much. He took more dope, but he was afraid to go heavy on it lest he drive his heart too hard. His legs turned numb.

He hadn't slept for a long time. Tracking Farrell hadn't been any breeze, and taking him—and It—had been plain and fancy hell. Lundy was only human. He was tired. Bushed. Cooked. Beat to the socks.

He sat down and rested a while, turning off his light to save the battery. The flowers watched him, glowing in the dark. He closed his eyes, but he could still feel them, watching and waiting.

After a minute or two he got up and went on.

The weeds grew thicker, and taller, and heavier with flowers.

More benzedrine, and damn the heart. The helmet light cut a cold white tunnel through the blackness. He followed it, walking faster. Weed fronds met and interlaced high above him, closing him in. Flowers bent inward, downward. Their petals almost brushed him. Fleshy petals, hungry and alive.

He started to run, over the wheel-ruts and the worn hollows of the road that still

went somewhere, under the black sea.

Lundy ran clumsily for a long time between the dark and pressing walls. The flowers got closer. They got close enough to catch his vac-suit, like hands grasping and slipping and grasping again. He began using the blaster.

He burned off a lot of them that way. They didn't like it. They began swaying in from their roots and down from the laced ceiling over his head. They hurt. They were angry. Lundy ran, sobbing without tears.

The road did him in. It crossed him up, suddenly, without warning. It ran along smoothly under the tunnel of weeds, and then it was a broken, jumbled mass of huge stone blocks, tipped up and thrown around like something a giant's kid got tired of playing with.

And the weeds had found places to stand in between them.

Lundy tripped and fell, cracking his head against the back of his helmet. For a moment all he could see was bright light flashing. Then that stopped, and he realized he must have jarred a connection loose somewhere because his own light was out.

He began to crawl over a great tilted block. The flowers burned bright in the darkness. Bright and close. Very close. Lundy opened his mouth. Nothing came out but a hoarse animal whimper. He was still holding the blaster. He fired it off a couple of times, and then he was on top of the block, lying flat on his belly.

He knew it was the end of the line, because he couldn't move any more.

The bright flowers came down through the dark. Lundy lay watching them. His face was quite blank. His dark eyes held a stubborn hatred, but nothing else.

He watched the flowers fasten on his vac-suit and start working. Then, from up ahead, through the dark close tunnel of the weeds, he saw the light.

It flared out suddenly, like lightning. A sheet of hot, bright gold cracking out like a whipped banner, lighting the end of the road.

Lighting the city, and the little procession coming out of it.

Lundy didn't believe any of it. He was half dead already, with his mind floating free of his body and beginning to

be wrapped up in dark clouds. He watched what he saw incuriously.

The golden light died down, and then flared out twice more, rhythmically. The road ran smooth again beyond the end of the tunnel, straight across a narrow plain. Beyond that, the city rose.

Lundy couldn't see much of it, because of the weeds. But it seemed to be a big city. There was a wall around it, of green marble veined with dusky rose, the edges worn round by centuries of water. There were broad gates of pure untarnished gold, standing open on golden pintles. Beyond them was a vast square paved in cloud-grey quartz, and the buildings rose around it like the castles Lundy remembered from Earth and his childhood, when there were clouds of a certain kind at sunset.

That's what the whole place looked like, under the flaring golden light. Cloud-cuckoo land at sunset. Remote, dreaming in beauty, with the black water drawn across it like a veil—something never destroyed because it never existed.

The creatures who came from between the golden gates and down the road were like tiny wisps of those clouds, torn free by some cold wandering breeze and driven away from the light.

They came drifting toward Lundy. They didn't seem to be moving fast, but they must have been because quite suddenly they were among the weeds. There were a lot of them; maybe forty or fifty. They seemed to be between three and four feet tall, and they were all the same sad, blue-grey, twilight color.

Lundy couldn't see what they were. They were vaguely man-shaped, and vaguely finny, and something that was more than vaguely something else, only he couldn't place it.

He was suddenly beyond caring. The dull black curtain around his mind got a hole in it, and fear came shrieking through it. He could feel the working and pulling of his vac-suit where the flowers were chewing on it as though it were his own skin.

He could feel sweat running cold on his body. In a minute that would be sea water running, and then . . .

Lundy began to fight. His lips peeled back off his teeth, but he didn't make any noise except his heavy breathing. He

fought the flowers, partly with the blaster, partly with brute strength. No science, no thought. Just the last blind struggle of an animal that didn't want to die.

The flowers held him. They smothered him, crushed him down, wrapped him in lovely burning petals of destruction. He seared a lot of them, but there were always more. Lundy didn't fight long.

He lay on his back, his knees drawn up a little toward a rigid, knotted belly, blind with sweat, his heart kicking him like a logger's boot. Cold, tense—waiting.

And then the flowers went away.

They didn't want to. They let go reluctantly, drawing back and snarling like cats robbed of a fat mouse, making small hungry feints at him. But they went.

LUNDY came nearer fanning off for keeps then than he ever had. Reaction wrung him out like a wet bar-rag. His heart quit beating; his body jerked like something on a string. Then, through a mist that might have been sweat, or tears, or the edge of the Hereafter, he saw the little blue-grey people looking down at him.

They hovered in a cloud above him, holding place with membranes as fluttering and delicate as bird-calls on a windy day. The membranes ran between arm and leg-members, both of which had thin flat swimming-webs. There were suckers on the legs, about where the heels would have been if they'd had feet.

Their bodies were slender and supple, and definitely feminine without having any of the usual human characteristics. They were beautiful. They weren't like anything Lundy had even seen before, or even dreamed about, but they were beautiful.

They had faces. Queer little pixie things without noses. Their mouths were round and tiny and rather sweet, but their eyes were their dominant feature.

Huge round golden eyes with pupils of deep brown. Soft eyes, gentle, inquiring, it made Lundy feel like crying, and so scared that it made him mad.

The flowers kept weaving around hopelessly. When one got too close to Lundy, one of the little people would slap it gently, the way you would a pet dog, and shoo it away.

"Do you live?"

III

LUNDY wasn't surprised by the telepathic voice. Thought-communication was commoner than speech and a lot simpler in many places on the inhabited worlds. Special gave its men a thorough training in it.

"I live, thanks to you."

There was something in the quality of the brain he touched that puzzled him. It was like nothing he'd ever met before.

He got to his feet, not very steadily. "You came just in time. How did you know I was here?"

"Your fear-thoughts carried to us. We know what it is to be afraid. So we came."

"There's nothing I can say but 'Thank you'."

"But of course we helped! Why not? You needn't thank us."

Lundy looked at the flowers burning sullenly in the gloom. "How is it you can boss them around? Why don't they . . ."

"But they're not cannibals! Not like—*The Others*." There was pure cold dread in that last thought.

"Cannibals." Lundy looked up at the cloud of dainty blue-grey woman-things. His skin got cold and a size too small for him.

Their soft golden eyes smiled down at him. "We're different from you, yes. Just as we're different from the fish. What is your thought? Bright things growing—weed—yes, they're kin to us."

Kin, thought Lundy. Yeah. About like we are to the animals. Plants. Living plants were no novelty on Venus. Why not plants with thinking minds? Plants that carried their roots along with them, and watched you with sad soft eyes.

"Let's get out of here," said Lundy.

They went down along the dark tunnel and out onto the road, and the flowers yearned like hungry dogs after Lundy but didn't touch him. He started out across the narrow plain, with the plant-women drifting cloudlike around him.

Seaweed. Little bits of kelp that could talk to you. It made Lundy feel queer.

The city made him feel queer, too. It was dark when he first saw it from the plain, with only the moonlight glow of the sand to touch it. It was a big city, stretching away behind its barrier wall. Big and

silent and very old, waiting there at the end of its road.

It was curiously more real in the dim light. Lundy lost trace of the water for a moment. It was like walking toward a sleeping city in the moonlight, feeling the secretive, faintly hostile strength of it laired and leashed, until dawn. . . .

Only there would never be a dawn for this city. Never, any more.

Lundy wanted suddenly to run away.

"Don't be afraid. We live there. It's safe."

Lundy shook his head irritably. Quite suddenly the brilliant light flared out again, three regular flashes. It seemed to come from somewhere to the right, out of a range of undersea mountains. Lundy felt a faint trembling of the sand. A volcanic fissure, probably, opened when the land sank.

The golden light changed the city again. Cloud-cuckoo land at sunset—a place where you could set your boots down on a dream.

When he went in through the gates he was awed, but not afraid. And then, while he stood in the square looking up at the great dim buildings, the thought came drifting down to him out of the cloud of little woman-things.

"It was safe. It was happy—before *She* came."

AFTER a long moment Lundy said, "She?"

"We haven't seen her. But our mates have. She came a little while ago and walked through the streets, and all our mates left us to follow her. They say she's beautiful beyond any of us, and . . ."

"And her eyes are hidden, and they have to see them. They have to look into her eyes or go crazy, so they follow her."

The sad little blue-grey cloud stirred in the dark water. Golden eyes looked down at him.

"How did you know? Do you follow her, too?"

Lundy took a deep, slow breath. The palms of his hands were wet. "Yes. Yes, I followed her, too."

"We feel your thought. . . ." They came down close around him. Their delicate membranes fluttered like fairy wings.

Their golden eyes were huge and soft and pleading.

"Can you help us? Can you bring our mates back safe? They've forgotten everything. If The Others should come . . ."

"The Others?"

Lundy's brain was drowned in stark and terrible fear. Pictures came through it. Vague gigantic dreams of nightmare . . .

"They come, riding the currents that go between the hot cracks in the mountains and the cold deeps. They eat. They destroy." The little woman-things were shaken suddenly like leaves in a gust of wind.

"We hide from them in the buildings. We can keep them out, away from our seed and the little new ones. But our mates have forgotten. If The Others come while they follow Her, outside and away from safety, they'll all be killed. We'll be left alone, and there'll be no more seed for us, and no more little new ones."

They pressed in close around him, touching him with their small blue-grey forefins.

"Can you help us? Oh, can you help us?"

Lundy closed his eyes. His mouth twitched and set. When he opened his eyes again they were hard as agates.

"I'll help you," he said, "or die trying."

It was dark in the great square, with only the pale sandglow seeping through the gates. For a moment the little blue-grey woman-creatures clung around him, not moving, except as the whole mass of them swayed slightly with the slow rhythm of the sea.

Then they burst away from him, outward, in a wild surge of hope—and Lundy stood with his mouth open, staring.

They weren't blue-grey any longer. They glowed suddenly, their wings and their dainty, supple bodies, a warm soft green that had a vibrant pulse of life behind it. And they blossomed.

The long, slender, living petals must have been retracted, like the fronds of a touch-me-not, while they wore the sad blue-grey. Now they broke out like coronals of flame around their small heads.

Blue and scarlet and gold, poppy-red and violet and flame, silver-white and warm pink like a morning cloud, streaming in the black water. Streaming from

small green bodies that rolled and tumbled high up against the dark, dreaming buildings like the butterflies that had danced there before the sunlight was lost forever.

Quite suddenly, then, they stopped. They drifted motionless in the water, and their colors dimmed. Lundy said,

"Where are they?"

"Deep in the city, beyond our buildings here—in the streets where only the curious young ones ever go. Oh, bring them back! Please bring them back!"

"If I come back myself," said Lundy, "I'll bring them."

He left them hovering in the great dark square and went on into the city.

HE WALKED down broad paved streets channelled with wheel-ruts and hollowed by generations of sandalled feet. The great water-worn buildings lifted up on either side, lighted by the erratic glare of the distant fissure.

The window-openings, typical of most Venusian architecture, were covered by grilles of marble and semi-precious stone, intricately hand-pierced like bits of jewelry. The great golden doors stood open on their uncorroded hinges. Through them Lundy could watch the life of the little plant-people being lived.

In some of the buildings the lower floor had been covered with sand. Plant-women hovered protectively over them, brushing the sand smooth where the water disturbed it. Lundy guessed that these were seed beds.

In other places there were whole colonies of tiny flower-things still rooted in the sand; a pale spring haze of green in the dimness. They sat in placid rows, nodding their pastel baby coronals and playing solemnly with bits of bright weed and colored stones. Here, too, the plant-women watched and guarded lovingly.

Several times Lundy saw groups of young plantlings, grown free of the sand, being taught to swim by the woman-creatures, tumbling in the black water like bright petals on a spring wind.

All the women were the same sad blue-grey, with their blossoms hidden.

They'd stay that way, unless he, Lundy, could finish the job Special had sent him to do. The job he hadn't been quite big enough to handle up to now.

Farrell, with the flesh flayed off his bones, and not feeling it because *She* was all he could think of. Jackie Smith, drowned in a flooded lock because *She* wanted to be free and he had helped her.

Was this Lundy guy so much bigger than Farrell and Smith, and all the other men who had gone crazy over Her? Big enough to catch The Vampire Lure in a net and keep it there, and not go nuts himself?

Lundy didn't feel that big. Not anywhere near that big.

He was remembering things. The first time he'd had It in a net. The last few minutes before the wreck, when he'd heard Her crying for freedom from inside the safe. Jackie Smith's face when he walked in with the water from the flooded lock, and his, Lundy's, own question—*Oh Lord, what did he see before he drowned?*

The tight cold knot was back in Lundy's belly again, and this time it had spurs on.

He left the colony behind him, walking down empty streets lit by the rhythmic flaring of the volcanic fissure. There was damage here. Pavements cracked and twisted with the settling, towers shaken down, the carved stone jalousies split out of the windows. Whole walls had fallen in, in some places, and most of the golden doors were wrecked, jammed wide open or gone entirely.

A dead city. So dead and silent that you couldn't breathe with it, and so old it made you crawl inside.

A swell place to go mad in, following a dream.

After a long time Lundy saw them—the mates of the little seaweed women. A long, long trail of them like a flight of homing birds, winding between the dark and broken towers.

They looked like their women. A little bigger, a little coarser, with strong tough dark-green bodies and brilliant coronals. Their golden eyes were fixed on something Lundy couldn't see, and they looked like the eyes of Lucifer yearning at the gates of Heaven.

Lundy began to run against the water, cutting across a wide plaza to get under the head of the procession. He unhooked the net from his belt with hands that felt like a couple of dead fish.

THEN he staggered suddenly, lost his footing, and went sprawling. It was as though somebody had pushed him with a strong hand. When he tried to get up it pushed him again, hard. The golden glare from the fissure was steadier now, and very bright.

The trail of little man-things bent suddenly in a long whipping bow, and Lundy knew what was the matter.

There was a current rising in the city. Rising like the hot white winds that used to howl in from the sea, carrying the rains.

"They ride the currents that go between the hot cracks in the mountains and the cold deeps. They eat. They destroy."

The Others. The Others, who were cannibals . . .

She led the bright trail of plant-men between the towers, and there was a current rising in the streets.

Lundy got up. He balanced himself against the thrust of the current and ran, following the procession. It was clumsy work, with the water and his leaded boots. He tried to gauge where *It*—or *She*—was from the focus of the plant-men's eyes.

The hot light flared up brighter. The water pulled and shoved at him. He looked back once, but he couldn't see anything in the shadows between the towers. He was scared.

He shook the net out, and he was scared.

Funny that *It*—or *She*—didn't see him. Funny *It* didn't sense his mind, even though he tried to keep it closed. But he wasn't a very big object down there in the shadows under the walls, and creating an illusion for that many minds would be a strain on anything, even creature from outer space.

He'd had the breaks once before, when he caught up with Farrell. He prayed to have them again.

He got them, for what good it did him.

The current caught the procession and pulled it down close to Lundy. He watched their eyes. *She* was still leading them. *She* had a physical body even if you couldn't see it, and the current would pull it, no matter how tiny it was.

He cast his net out, fast.

It bellied out in the black water and came swooping back to his pull, and there was something in it. Something tiny and cylindrical and vicious. Something alive.

He drew the net tight, shivering and sweating with nervous excitement. And the plant-men attacked.

They swooped on him in a brilliant cloud. Their golden eyes burned. There was no sense in them. Their minds shrieked and clamored at him, a formless howl of rage—and fear, for *Her*.

They beat at him with their little green fins. Their coronals blazed, hot angry splashes of colored flame against the dark water. They wrenched at the net, tore at it, beating their membranes like wings against the rising current.

Lundy was a solid, muscular little guy. He snarled and fought for the net like a wolf over a yearling lamb. He lost it anyway. He fell on his face under a small mountain of churning man-things and lay gasping for the breath they knocked out of him, thankful for the vac-suit that saved him from being crushed flat.

He watched them take the net. They clustered around it in a globe like a swarm of bees, rolling around in the moving water. Their golden eyes had a terrible stricken look.

They couldn't open the net. Lundy had drawn it tight and fastened it, and they didn't have fingers. They stroked and pawed it with their fins, but they couldn't let *Her* out.

Lundy got up on his hands and knees. The current quickened. It roared down between the broken towers like a black wind and took the swarm of man-things with it, still clutching the net.

And then The Others came.

IV

LUNDY saw them a long way off. For a moment he didn't believe it. He thought they must be shadows cast by the fitful glare of the fissure. He braced himself against a building and stood watching.

Stood watching, and then seeing as the rushing current brought them closer. He didn't move, except to lift his jaw a little trying to breathe. He simply stood, cold as a dead man's feet and just as numb.

They looked something like the giant rays he'd seen back on Earth, only they were plants. Great sleek bulbs of kelp with their leaves spread like wings to the current. Their long teardrop bodies ended

in a flange like a fishtail that served as a rudder and they had tentacles for arms.

They were colored a deep red-brown like dried blood. The golden flare of the fissure made their cold eyes gleam. It showed their round mouth-holes full of sharp hair-spines, and the stinging deadly cups on the undersides of their huge tentacles.

Those arms were long enough and tough enough to pierce even the fabric of a vac-suit. Lundy didn't know whether they ate flesh or not, but it didn't matter. He wouldn't care, after he'd been slapped with one of those tentacles.

The net with *Her* in it was getting away from him, and The Others were coming down on top of him. Even if he'd wanted to quit his job right then there wasn't any place to hide in these ruined, doorless buildings.

Lundy shot his suit full of precious oxygen and added himself to the creatures riding that black current to hell.

It swept him like a bubble between the dead towers, but not fast enough. He wasn't very far ahead of the kelp-things. He tried to swim, to make himself go faster, but it was like racing an oared dinghy against a fleet of sixteen-meter sloops with everything set.

He could see the cluster of plant-men ahead of him. They hadn't changed position. They rolled and tumbled in the water, using a lot of the forward push to go around with, so that Lundy was able to overhaul them.

But not fast enough. Not nearly fast enough.

The hell of it was he couldn't see anything to do if he got there. The net was way inside the globe. They weren't going to let him take it away. And if he did, what would it get anybody? They'd still follow *Her*, without sense enough to run away from the kelp-beasts.

Unless . . .

It hit Lundy all of a sudden. A hope, a solution. Hit him neatly as the leading kelp-thing climbed up on his heels and brought its leaf-wings in around him, hard.

Lundy let go an animal howl of fear and kicked wildly, shooting more air into his suit. He went up fast, and the wings grazed his boots but didn't quite catch him. Lundy rolled over and fed the thing

a full charge out of his blaster, right through the eye.

It began to thrash and flounder like a shot bird. The ones coming right behind it got tangled up with it and then stopped to eat. Pretty soon there were a lot of them tumbling around it and fighting like a flock of gulls over a fish. Lundy swam furiously, cursing the clumsy suit.

There were a lot of the things that hadn't stopped, and the ones that had wouldn't stay long. Lundy kicked and strained and sweated. He was scared. He had the wind up so hard it was blowing his guts out, and it was like swimming in a nightmare, where you're tied.

The current seemed to move faster up where he was now. He gathered his thoughts into a tight beam and threw them into the heart of the cluster of plant-men, at the creature in the net.

I can free you. I'm the only one that can.

A voice answered him, inside his mind. The voice he had heard once before, back in the cabin of the wrecked flier. A voice as sweet and small as Pan-pipes calling on the Hills of Fay.

I know. My thought crossed yours. . . . The elfin voice broke suddenly, almost on a gasp of pain. Very faintly, Lundy heard:

Heavy! Heavy! I am slow. . .

A longing for something beyond his experience stabbed Lundy like the cry of a frightened child. And then the globe of man-things burst apart as though a giant wind had struck them.

Lundy watched them wake up, out of their dream.

She had vanished, and now they didn't know why they were here or what they were doing. They had a heart-shaking memory of some beauty they couldn't touch, and that was all. They were lost, and frightened.

Then they saw The Others.

IT WAS as though someone had hit them a stunning blow with his fist. They hung motionless, swept along by the current, staring back with dazed golden eyes. Their brilliant petals curled inward and vanished, and the green of their bodies dulled almost to black.

The kelp-beasts spread their wings wide

and rushed toward them like great dark birds. And up ahead, under the sullen golden glare, Lundy saw the distant buildings of the colony. Some of the doors were still open, with knots of tiny figures waiting beside them.

Lundy was still a little ahead of the kelp-things. He grabbed up the floating net and hooked it to his belt, and then steered himself clumsily toward a broken tower jutting up to his right.

He hurled a wild telepathic shout at the plant-men, trying to make them turn and run, telling them that he'd hold off The Others. They were too scared to hear him. He cursed them, almost crying. On the third try he got through and they came to life in a hurry, rushing away with all the speed they had.

By that time Lundy was braced on his pinnacle of stone, and the kelp-beasts were right on top of him.

He got busy with both blasters. He burned down a lot of the things. Pretty soon the water all around him was full of thrashing bodies where the living had stopped to fight over the dead. But he couldn't get them all, and a few got by him.

Almost without turning his head he could see huge red bird-shapes overhauling stragglers, wrapping them in broad wings, and then lying quiet in the rush of the current, feeding.

They kept the doors open, those little woman-things. They waited until the last of their mates came home, and then slammed the golden panels on the blunt noses of the kelp-things. Not many of the little men were lost. Only a few small wives would hide their petals and wear their sad blue-grey. Lundy felt good about that.

It was nice he felt good about something, because Old Mr. Grim was climbing right up on Lundy's shoulders, showing his teeth. The kelp-beasts had finally found out who was hurting them. Also, now, Lundy was the only food in sight.

They were ganging up for a rush, wheeling and sideslipping in the spate of black water. Lundy got two more, and then one blaster charge fizzled out, and right after it the other one became dull.

Lundy stood alone on his broken tower and watched death sweep in around him.

And the sweet elfin voice spoke out of the net:

Let me free. Let me free!

Lundy set his jaw tight and did the only thing he could think of. He deflated his vac-suit and jumped, plunging down into the black depths of the ruined building.

The kelp-things folded their leaves back like the wings of a diving bird and came down after him, using their tails for power.

Fitful flares of light came through broken walls and window openings. Lundy went down a long way. He didn't have to bother about stairs. The quakes had knocked most of the floors out.

The kelp-things followed him. Their long sinuous bodies were maneuverable as a shark's, and they were fast.

And all the time the little voice cried in his mind, asking for freedom.

Lundy hit bottom.

The walls were fairly solid down here, and it was dark, and the place was choked with rubble. Things got a little confused. Lundy's helmet light was shot, and he wouldn't have used it anyway because it would have guided the hunters.

He felt them, swirling and darting around him. He ran, to no place in particular. The broken stones tripped him. Three times great sinewy bodies brushed him, knocking him spinning, but they couldn't quite find him in the darkness, chiefly because they got in each other's way.

Lundy fell through suddenly into a great hall, lying beside whatever room he had been in and a little below it. It was hardly damaged. Golden doors stood open to the water, and there was plenty of light.

Plenty of light for Lundy to see some more of the kelp-beasts poking hopeful faces in, and plenty of light for them to see Lundy.

The elfin voice called, *Let me out! Let me out!*

LUNDY didn't have breath enough left to curse. He turned and ran, and the kelp-beasts gave a lazy flirt of their tails and caught up with him in the first thirty feet. They almost laughed in his face.

The only thing that saved Lundy was that when they opened their leaf-wings to

take him they interfered with each other. It slowed them, just for a moment. Just long enough for Lundy to see the door.

A little door of black stone with no carving on it, standing half-open on a golden pivot, about ten feet away.

Lundy made for it. He dodged out from under one huge swooping wing, made a wild leap that almost tore him apart, and grabbed the edge of the door with his hands, doubling up and pulling.

A tentacle tip struck his feet. His lead boots hit the floor, and for a minute he thought his legs were broken. But the surge of water the blow made helped to carry him in through the narrow opening.

Half a dozen blunt red-brown heads tried to come through after him, and were stopped. Lundy was down on his hands and knees. He was trying to breathe, but somebody had put a heavy building on his chest. Also, it was getting hard to see anything.

He crawled over and put his shoulder against the door and pushed. It wouldn't budge. The building had settled and jammed the pivot for keeps. Even the butting kelp-things couldn't jar it.

But they kept on trying. Lundy crawled away. After a while some of the weight went off his chest and he could see better.

A shaft of fitful golden light shot in through a crack about ten feet above him. A small crack, not even big enough to let a baby in and out. It was the only opening other than the door.

The room was small, too. The stone walls were dead black, without ornament or carving, except on the rear wall.

There was a square block of jet there, about eight feet long by four wide, hollowed in a peculiar and unpleasantly suggestive fashion. Above it there was a single huge ruby set in the stone, burning red like a foretaste of hell fire.

Lundy had seen similar small chambers in old cities still on dry land. They were where men had gone to die for crimes against society and the gods.

Lundy looked at the hungry monsters pushing at the immovable door and laughed. There was no particular humor in it. He fired his last shot, and sat down.

The brutes might go away sometime, maybe. But unless they went within a

very few minutes, it wasn't going to matter. Lundy's oxygen was getting low, and it was still a long way to the coast.

The voice from the net cried out, *Let me free!*

"The hell with you," said Lundy. He was tired. He was so tired he didn't care much whether he lived or died.

He made sure the net was fast to his belt, and tightly closed.

"If I live, you go back to Vhia with me. If I die—well, you won't be able to hurt anybody again. There'll be one less devil loose on Venus."

Free! Free! Free! I must be free! This heavy weight. . .

"Sure. Free to lead guys like Farrell into going crazy, and leaving their wives and kids. Free to kill. . . ." He looked with sultry eyes at the net. "Jackie Smith was my pal. You think I'd let you go? You think anything you could do would make me let you go?"

Then he saw her.

Right through the net, as though the metal mesh was cellophane. She crouched there in his lap, a tiny thing less than two feet high, doubled over her knees. The curve of her back was something an angel had carved out of a whisp of warm, pearl-pink cloud.

V

LUNDY broke into a trembling sweat. He shut his eyes. It didn't matter. He saw her. He couldn't help seeing her. He tried to fight his mind, but he was tired. . . .

Her hair hid most of her. It had black night in it, and moonbeams, and glints of fire like a humming-bird's breast. Hair you dream about. Hair you could smother yourself in, and die happy.

She raised her head slowly, letting the veil of warm darkness fall away from her. Her eyes were shadowed, hidden under thick lashes. She raised her hands to Lundy, like a child praying.

But she wasn't a child. She was a woman, naked as a pearl and so lovely that Lundy sobbed with it, in shivering ecstasy.

"No," he said hoarsely. "No. No!"

She held her arms up to be free, and didn't move.

Lundy tore the net loose from his belt and flung it on the altar block. He got up and went lurching to the door, but the kelp-things were still there, still hungry. He sat down again, in a corner as far away from both places as he could get, and took some benzedrine.

It was the wrong thing to do. He'd about reached his limit. It made him light-headed. He couldn't fight her, couldn't shut her out. She knelt on the altar with her hands stretched out to him, and a shaft of golden light falling on her like something in a church.

"Open your eyes," he said. "Open your eyes and look at me."

Let me free. Let me free!

Freedom Lundy didn't know anything about. The freedom of outer space, with the whole Milky Way to play in and nothing to hold you back. And with the longing, fear. A blind, stricken terror. . . .

"No!" Lundy said.

Things got dark for Lundy. Presently he found himself at the altar block, fumbling at the net.

He wrenched away and went stumbling back to his corner. He was twitching all over like a frightened dog.

"Why do you want to do it? Why do you have to torture men—drive them crazy for something they can't have — kill them?"

Torture? Crazy? Kill? I don't understand. They worship me. It is pleasant to be worshiped.

"Pleasant?" Lundy was yelling aloud, and didn't know it. "Pleasant, damn you! So you kill a good guy like Farrell, and drown Jackie Smith. . . ."

Kill? Wait — give me the thought again. . . .

Something inside Lundy turned cold and still, holding its breath. He sent the thought again. Death. Cessation. Silence, and the dark.

The tiny glowing figure on the black stone bent over its knees again, and it was sadder than a seabird's cry at sunset.

So will I be soon. So will all of us. Why did this planet take us out of space? The weight, the pressure breaks and crushes us, and we can't get free. In space there was no death, but now we die. . . .

Lundy stood quite still. The blood beat like drums in his temples.

"You mean that all you creatures out of space are dying? That the—the madness will stop of itself?"

Soon. Very soon. There was no death in space! There was no pain! We didn't know about them. Everything here was new, to be tasted and played with. We didn't know. . . .

"Hell!" said Lundy, and looked at the creatures beating at the crack of the stone door. He sat down.

You, too, will die.

LUNDY raised his head slowly. His eyes had a terrible brightness.

"You like to be worshiped," he whispered. "Would you like to be worshiped after you die? Would you like to be remembered always as something good and beautiful—a goddess?"

That would be better than to be forgotten.

"Will you do what I ask of you, then? You can save my life, if you will. You can save the lives of a lot of those little flower-people. I'll see to it that everyone knows your true story. Now you're hated and feared, but after that you'll be loved."

Will you let me free of this net?

"If you promise to do what I ask."

I would rather die at least free of this net. The tiny figure trembled and shook back the veil of dark hair. *Hurry. Tell me. . . .*

"Lead these creatures away from the door. Lead all of them in the city away, to the fire in the mountain where they'll be destroyed."

They will worship me. It is better than dying in a net. I promise.

Lundy got up and went to the altar. His feet were not steady. His hands were not steady, either, untying the net. Sweat ran in his eyes. She didn't have to keep her promise. She didn't have to. . . .

The net fell away. She stood up on her tiny pink feet. Slowly, like a swirl of mist straightening in a little breeze. She threw her head back and smiled. Her mouth was red and sulky, her teeth whiter than new snow. Her lowered lids had

faint blue shadows traced on them.

She began to grow, in the golden shaft of light, like a pillar of cloud rising toward the sun. Lundy's heart stood still. The clear gleam of her skin, the line of her throat and her young breasts, the supple turn of her flank and thigh. . . .

You worship me, too.

Lundy stepped back, two lurching steps. "I worship you," he whispered. "Let me see your eyes."

She smiled and turned her head away. She stepped off the altar block, floating past him through the black water. A dream-thing, without weight or substance, and more desirable than all the women Lundy had seen in his life or his dreams.

He followed her, staggering. He tried to catch her. "Open your eyes! Please open your eyes!"

She floated on, through the crack of the stone door. The kelp-things didn't see her. All they saw was Lundy, coming toward them.

"Open your eyes!"

She turned, then, just before Lundy had stepped out to death in the hall beyond. He stopped, and watched her raise her shadowed lids.

He screamed, just once, and fell forward onto the black floor.

He never knew how long he lay there. It couldn't have been long in time, because he still had barely enough oxygen to make it to the coast when he came to. The kelp-beasts were gone.

But the time to Lundy was an eternity—an eternity he came out of with whitened hair and bitter lines around his mouth, and a sadness that never left his eyes.

He'd only had his dream a little while. A few brief moments, already shadowed by death. His mind was drugged and tired, and didn't feel things as deeply and clearly as it might. That was all that saved him.

But he knew what Jackie Smith saw before he drowned. He knew why men had died or gone mad forever, when they looked into the eyes of their dream, and by looking, destroyed it.

Because, behind those shadowed, perfect lids, there was—*Nothing*.

MORGUE SHIP

By RAY BRADBURY

This was Burnett's last trip. Three more shelves to fill with space-slain warriors—and he would be among the living again.



Illustration by Doolin

HE HEARD the star-port grind open. and the movement of the metal claws groping into space, and then the star-port closed.

There was another dead man aboard the *Constellation*.

Sam Burnett shook his long head, trying to think clearly. Pallid and quiet,

three bodies lay on the cold transparent tables around him; machines stirred, revolved, hummed. He didn't see them. He didn't see anything but a red haze over his mind. It blotted out the far wall of the laboratory where the shelves went up and down, numbered in scarlet, keeping the bodies of soldiers from all further harm.

Burnett didn't move. He stood there in his rumpled white surgical gown, staring at his fingers gloved in bone-white rubber; feeling all tight and wild inside himself. It went on for days. Moving the ship. Opening the star-port. Extending the retriever claw. Plucking some poor warrior's body out of the void.

He didn't like it any more. Ten years is too long to go back and forth from Earth to nowhere. You came out empty and you went back full-cargoed with a lot of warriors who didn't laugh or talk or smoke, who just lay on their shelves, all one hundred of them, waiting for a decent burial.

"Number ninety-eight." Coming matter of fact and slow, Rice's voice from the ceiling radio hit Burnett.

"Number ninety-eight," Burnett repeated. "Working on ninety-five, ninety-six and ninety-seven now. Blood-pumps, preservative, slight surgery." Off a million miles away his voice was talking. It sounded deep. It didn't belong to him anymore.

Rice said:

"Boyohbody! Two more pick-ups and back to New York. Me for a ten-day drunk!"

Burnett peeled the gloves off his huge, red, soft hands, slapped them into a floor incinerator mouth. Back to Earth. Then spin around and shoot right out again in the trail of the war-rockets that blasted one another in galactic fury, to sidle up behind gutted wrecks of ships, salvaging any bodies still intact after the conflict.

Two men. Rice and himself. Sharing a cozy morgue ship with a hundred other men who had forgotten, quite suddenly, however, to talk again.

Ten years of it. Every hour of those ten years eating like maggots inside, working out to the surface of Burnett's face, working under the husk of his starved eyes and starved limbs. Starved for life. Starved for action.

This would be his last trip, or he'd know the reason why!

"Sam!"

Burnett jerked. Rice's voice clipped through the drainage-preservative lab, bounded against glassite retorts, echoed from the refrigerator shelves. Burnett stared at the tabled bodies as if they would leap to life, even while preservative was being pumped into their veins.

"Sam! On the double! Up the rungs!"

Burnett closed his eyes and said a couple of words, firmly. Nothing was worth running for any more. Another body. There had been one hundred thousand bodies preceding it. Nothing unusual about a body with blood cooling in it.

SHAKING his head, he walked unsteadily toward the rungs that gleamed up into the air-lock, control-room sector of the rocket. He climbed without making any noise on the rungs.

He kept thinking the one thing he couldn't forget.

You never catch up with the war.

All the color is ahead of you. The drive of orange rocket traces across stars, the whamming of steel-nosed bombs into elusive targets, the titanic explosions and breathless pursuits, the flags and the excited glory are always a million miles ahead.

He bit his teeth together.

You never catch up with the war.

You come along when space has settled back, when the vacuum has stopped trembling from unleashed forces between worlds. You come along in the dark quiet of death to find the wreckage plunging with all the fury of its original acceleration in no particular direction. You can only see it; you don't hear anything in space but your own heart kicking your ribs.

You see bodies, each in its own terrific orbit, given impetus by grinding collisions, tossed from mother ships and dancing head over feet forever and forever with no goal. Bits of flesh in ruptured space suits, mouths open for air that had never been there in a hundred billion centuries. And they kept dancing without music until you extended the retriever-claw and culled them into the air-lock.

That was all the war-glory he got. Nothing but the stunned, shivering silence, the memory of rockets long gone, and the

shelves filling up all too quickly with men who had once loved laughing.

You wondered who all the men were; and who the next ones would be. After ten years you made yourself blind to them. You went around doing your job with mechanical hands.

But even a machine breaks down. . . .

"SAM!" Rice turned swiftly as Burnett dragged himself up the ladder. Red and warm, Rice's face hovered over the body of a sprawled enemy official. "Take a look at this!"

Burnett caught his breath. His eyes narrowed. There was something wrong with the body; his experienced glance knew that. He didn't know what it was.

Maybe it was because the body looked a little *too* dead.

Burnett didn't say anything, but he climbed the rest of the way, stood quietly in the grey-metal air-lock. The enemy official was as delicately made as a fine white spider. Eyelids, closed, were faintly blue. The hair was thin silken strands of pale gold, waved and pressed close to a veined skull. Where the thin-lipped mouth fell open a cluster of needle-tipped teeth glittered. The fragile body was enclosed completely in milk-pale syntha-silk, a holstered gun at the middle.

Burnett rubbed his jaw. "Well?"

Rice exploded. His eyes were hot in his young, sharp-cut face, hot and black. "Good Lord, Sam, do you know who this is?"

Burnett scowled uneasily and said no.

"It's Lethla!" Rice retorted.

Burnett said, "Lethla?" And then: "Oh, yes! Kriere's majordomo. That right?"

"Don't say it calm, Sam. Say it big. Say it big! If Lethla is here in space, then Kriere's not far away from him!"

Burnett shrugged. More bodies, more people, more war. What the hell. What the hell. He was tired. Talk about bodies and rulers to someone else.

Rice grabbed him by the shoulders. "Snap out of it, Sam. Think! Kriere—The All-Mighty—in our territory. His right hand man dead. That means Kriere was in an accident, too!"

Sam opened his thin lips and the words fell out all by themselves. "Look, Rice, you're new at this game. 'I've been at it

ever since the Venus-Earth mess started. It's been see-sawing back and forth since the day you played hookey in the tenth grade, and I've been in the thick of it. When there's nothing left but seared memories, I'll be prowling through the void picking up warriors and taking them back to the good green Earth. Grisly, yes, but it's routine.

"As for Kriere—if he's anywhere around, he's smart. Every precaution is taken to protect that one."

"But Lethla! His body must mean something!"

"And if it does? Have we got guns aboard this morgue-ship? Are we a battle-cruiser to go against him?"

"We'll radio for help?"

"Yeah? If there's a warship within our radio range, seven hundred thousand miles, we'll get it. Unfortunately, the tide of battle has swept out past Earth in a new war concerning Io. That's out, Rice."

Rice stood about three inches below Sam Burnett's six-foot-one. Jaw hard and determined, he stared at Sam, a funny light in his eyes. His fingers twitched all by themselves at his sides. His mouth twisted, "You're one hell of a patriot, Sam Burnett!"

Burnett reached out with one long finger, tapped it quietly on Rice's barrel-chest. "Haul a cargo of corpses for three thousand nights and days and see how patriotic you feel. All those fine muscled lads bloated and crushed by space pressures and heat-blasts. Fine lads who start out smiling and get the smile burned off down to the bone—"

Burnett swallowed and didn't say anything more, but he closed his eyes. He stood there, smelling the death-odor in the hot air of the ship, hearing the chug-chug-chug of the blood pumps down below, and his own heart waiting warm and heavy at the base of his throat.

"This is my last cargo, Rice. I can't take it any longer. And I don't care much how I go back to earth. This Venusian here—what's his name? Lethla. He's number ninety-eight. Shove me into shelf ninety-nine beside him and get the hell home. That's how I feel!"

Rice was going to say something, but he didn't have time.

Lethla was alive.

He rose from the floor with slow, easy

movements, almost like a dream. He didn't say anything. The heat-blast in his white fingers did all the necessary talking. It didn't say anything either, but Burnett knew what language it would use if it had to.

Burnett swallowed hard. The body had looked funny. Too dead. Now he knew why. Involuntarily, Burnett moved forward. Lethla moved like a pale spider, flicking his fragile arm to cover Burnett, the gun in it like a dead cold star.

Rice sucked in his breath. Burnett forced himself to take it easy. From the corners of his eyes he saw Rice's expression go deep and tight, biting lines into his sharp face.

Rice got it out, finally. "How'd you do it?" he demanded, bitterly. "How'd you live in the void? It's impossible!"

A crazy thought came ramming down and exploded in Burnett's head. *You never catch up with the war!*

But what if the war catches up with you?

What in hell would Lethla be wanting aboard a morgue ship?

LETHLA half-crouched in the midst of the smell of death and the chugging of blood-pumps below. In the silence he reached up with quick fingers, tapped a tiny crystal stud upon the back of his head, and the halves of a microscopically thin chrysalis parted transparently off of his face. He shucked it off, trailing air-tendrils that had been inserted, hidden in the uniform, ending in thin globules of oxygen.

He spoke. Triumph warmed his crystal-thin voice. "That's how I did it, Earthman."

"Glassite!" said Rice. "A face-moulded mask of glassite!"

Lethla nodded. His milk-blue eyes dilated. "Very marvelously pared to an unbreakable thickness of one-thirtieth of an inch; worn only on the head. You have to look quickly to notice it, and, unfortunately, viewed as you saw it, outside the ship, floating in the void, not discernible at all."

Prickles of sweat appeared on Rice's face. He swore at the Venusian and the Venusian laughed like some sort of stringed instrument, high and quick.

Burnett laughed, too. Ironically. "First time in years a man ever came aboard the Constellation alive. It's a welcome change."

Lethla showed his needle-like teeth. "I thought it might be. Where's your radio?"

"Go find it!" snapped Rice, hotly.

"I will." One hand, blue-veined, on the ladder-rungs, Lethla paused. "I know you're weaponless; Purple Cross regulations. And this air-lock is safe. Don't move." Whispering, his naked feet padded white up the ladder. Two long breaths later something crashed; metal and glass and coils. The radio.

Burnett put his shoulder blades against the wall-metal, looking at his feet. When he glanced up, Rice's fresh, animated face was spoiled by the new bitterness in it.

Lethla came down. Like a breath of air on the rungs.

He smiled. "That's better. Now. We can talk—"

Rice said it, slow:

"Interplanetary law declares it straight, Lethla! Get out! Only dead men belong here."

Lethla's gun grip tightened. "More talk of that nature, and only dead men there will be." He blinked. "But first—we must rescue Kriere. . . ."

"Kriere!" Rice acted as if he had been hit in the jaw.

Burnett moved his tongue back and forth on his lips silently, his eyes lidded, listening to the two of them as if they were a radio drama. Lethla's voice came next:

"Rather unfortunately, yes. He's still alive, heading toward Venus at an orbital velocity of two thousand m.p.h., wearing one of these air-chrysalis. Enough air for two more hours. Our flag ship was attacked unexpectedly yesterday near Mars. We were forced to take to the life-boats, scattering, Kriere and I in one, the others sacrificing their lives to cover our escape. We were lucky. We got through the Earth cordon unseen. But luck can't last forever.

"We saw your morgue ship an hour ago. It's a long, long way to Venus. We were running out of fuel, food, water. Radio was broken. Capture was certain. You were coming our way; we took the chance. We set a small time-bomb to destroy the life-rocket, and cast off, wear-

ing our chrysalis-helmets. It was the first time we had ever tried using them to trick anyone. We knew you wouldn't know we were alive until it was too late and we controlled your ship. We knew you picked up all bodies for brief exams, returning alien corpses to space later."

Rice's voice was sullen. "A set-up for you, huh? Traveling under the protection of the Purple Cross you can get your damned All-Mighty safe to Venus."

Lethla bowed slightly. "Who would suspect a Morgue Rocket of providing safe hiding for precious Venusian cargo?"

"Precious is the word for you, brother!" said Rice.

"Enough!" Lethla moved his gun several inches.

"Accelerate toward Venus, mote-detectors wide open. Kriere must be picked up—now!"

RICE didn't move. Burnett moved first, feeling alive for the first time in years. "Sure," said Sam, smiling. "We'll pick him up."

"No tricks," said Lethla.

Burnett scowled and smiled together. "No tricks. You'll have Kriere on board the *Constellation* in half an hour or I'm no coroner."

"Follow me up the ladder."

Lethla danced up, turned, waved his gun. "Come on."

Burnett went up, quick. Almost as if he enjoyed doing Lethla a favor. Rice grumbled and cursed after him.

On the way up, Burnett thought about it. About Lethla poised like a white feather at the top, holding death in his hand. You never knew whose body would come in through the star-port next. Number ninety-eight was Lethla. Number ninety-nine would be Kriere.

There were two shelves numbered and empty. They should be filled. And what more proper than that Kriere and Lethla should fill them? But, he chewed his lip, that would need a bit of doing. And even then the cargo wouldn't be full. Still one more body to get; one hundred. And you never knew who it would be.

He came out of the quick thoughts when he looped his long leg over the hole-rim, stepped up, faced Lethla in a cramped control room that was one glittering swirl of

silver levers, audio-plates and visuals. Chronometers, clicking, told of the steady dropping toward the sun at a slow pace.

Burnett set his teeth together, bone against bone. Help Kriere escape? See him safely to Venus, and then be freed? Sounded easy, wouldn't be hard. Venusians weren't blind with malice. Rice and he could come out alive; if they co-operated.

But there were a lot of warriors sleeping on a lot of numbered shelves in the dim corridors of the long years. And their dead lips were stirring to life in Burnett's ears. Not so easily could they be ignored.

You may never catch up with the war again.

The last trip!

Yes, this could be it. Capture Kriere and end the war. But what ridiculous fantasy was it made him believe he could actually do it?

Two muscles moved on Burnett, one in each long cheek. The sag in his body vanished as he tautened his spine, flexed his lean-sinewed arms, wet thin lips.

"Now, where do you want this crate?" he asked Lethla easily.

Lethla exhaled softly. "Cooperation. I like it. You're wise, Earthman."

"Very," said Burnett.

He was thinking about three thousand eternal nights of young bodies being ripped, slaughtered, flung to the vacuum tides. Ten years of hating a job and hoping that some day there would be a last trip and it would all be over.

Burnett laughed through his nose. Controls moved under his fingers like fluid; loved, caressed, tended by his familiar touching. Looking ahead, he squinted.

"There's your Ruler now, Lethla. Doing somersaults. Looks dead. A good trick."

"Cut power! We don't want to burn him!"

BURNETT CUT. Kriere's milky face floated dreamily into a visual-screen, eyes sealed, lips gaping, hands sagging, clutching emptily at the stars.

"We're about fifty miles from him, catching up." Burnett turned to Lethla with an intent scowl. Funny. This was the first and the last time anybody would ever

board the *Constellation* alive. His stomach went flat, tautened with sudden weakening fear.

If Kriere could be captured, that meant the end of the war, the end of shelves stacked with sleeping warriors, the end of this blind searching. Kriere, then, had to be taken aboard. After that—

Kriere, the All-Mighty. At whose behest all space had quivered like a smitten gong for part of a century. Kriere, revolving in his neat, water-blue uniform, emblems shining gold, heat-gun tucked in glossy jet holster. With Kriere aboard, chances of overcoming him would be eliminated. Now: Rice and Burnett against Lethla. Lethla favored because of his gun.

Kriere would make odds impossible.

Something had to be done before Kriere came in.

Lethla had to be yanked off guard. Shocked, bewildered, fooled—somehow. But—how?

Burnett's jaw froze tight. He could feel a spot on his shoulder-blade where Lethla would send a bullet crashing into rib, sinew, artery—heart.

There was a way. And there was a weapon. And the war would be over and this would be the last trip.

Sweat covered his palms in a nervous smear.

"Steady, Rice," he said, matter of factly. With the rockets cut, there was too much silence, and his voice sounded guilty standing up alone in the center of that silence. "Take controls, Rice. I'll manipulate the star-port."

Burnett slipped from the control console. Rice replaced him grimly. Burnett strode to the next console of levers. That spot on his back kept aching like it was sear-branded X. For the place where the bullet sings and rips. And if you turn quick, catching it in the arm first, why—

Kriere loomed bigger, a white spider delicately dancing on a web of stars. His eyes flicked open behind the glassite sheath, and saw the *Constellation*. Kriere smiled. His hands came up. He knew he was about to be rescued.

Burnett smiled right back at him. What Kriere didn't know was that he was about to end a ten-years' war.

There was only *one* way of drawing

Lethla off guard, and it had to be fast.

Burnett jabbed a purple-topped stud. The starport clashed open as it had done a thousand times before; but for the first time it was a good sound. And out of the starport, at Sam Burnett's easily fingered directons, slid the long claw-like mechanism that picked up bodies from space.

Lethla watched, intent and cold and quiet. The gun was cold and quiet, too.

The claw glided toward Kriere without a sound, now, dream-like in its slowness. It reached Kriere.

Burnett inhaled a deep breath.

The metal claw cuddled Kriere in its shiny palm.

Lethla watched.

He watched while Burnett exhaled, touched another lever and said: "You know, Lethla, there's an old saying that only dead men come aboard the *Constellation*. I believe it."

AND THE claw closed as Burnett spoke, closed slowly and certainly, all around Kriere, crushing him into a ridiculous posture of silence. There was blood running on the claw, and the only recognizable part was the head, which was carefully preserved for identification.

That was the only way to draw Lethla off guard.

Burnett spun about and leaped.

The horror on Lethla's face didn't go away as he fired his gun.

Rice came in fighting, too, but not before something like a red-hot ramrod stabbed Sam Burnett, catching him in the ribs, spinning him back like a drunken idiot to fall in a corner.

Fists made blunt flesh noises. Lethla went down, weaponless and screaming. Rice kicked. After awhile Lethla quit screaming, and the room swam around in Burnett's eyes, and he closed them tight and started laughing.

He didn't finish laughing for maybe ten minutes. He heard the retriever claws come inside, and the star-port grind shut.

Out of the red darkness, Rice's voice came and then he could see Rice's young face over him. Burnett groaned.

Rice said, "Sam, you shouldn't have done it. You shouldn't have, Sam."

"To hell with it." Burnett winced, and

fought to keep his eyes open. Something wet and sticky covered his chest. "I said this was my last trip and I meant it. One way or the other, I'd have quit!"

"This is the hard way—"

"Maybe, I dunno. Kind of nice to think of all those kids who'll never have to come aboard the *Constellation*, though, Rice." His voice trailed off. "You watch the shelves fill up and you never know who'll be next. Who'd have thought, four days ago—"

Something happened to his tongue so it felt like hard ice blocking his mouth. He had a lot more words to say, but only time to get a few of them out:

"Rice?"

"Yeah, Sam?"

"We haven't got a full cargo, boy."

"Full enough for me, sir."

"But still not full. If we went back to Center Base without filling the shelves, it wouldn't be right. Look there—number ninety-eight is Lethla—number ninety-nine is Kriere. Three thousand days of rolling this rocket, and not once come back without a bunch of the kids who want to sleep easy on the good green earth. Not right to be going back any way—but—the way—we used to—"

His voice got all full of fog. As thick as the fists of a dozen warriors. Rice was going away from him. Rice was standing still, and Burnett was lying down, not moving, but somehow Rice was going away a million miles.

"Ain't I one hell of a patriot, Rice?"

Then everything got dark except Rice's face. And that was starting to dissolve.

Ninety-eight: Lethla. Ninety-nine: Kriere.

He could still see Rice standing over him for a long time, breathing out and in. Down under the tables the blood-pumps pulsed and pulsed, thick and slow. Rice looked down at Burnett and then at the empty shelf at the far end of the room, and then back at Burnett again.

And then he said softly:

"One hundred."

PS's Feature Flash

FLASHING you the highlights on one of the cosmic-minded writers who help to nourish Planet Stories and the Vizigraph.

EXACTLY AS ORDERED!

DEAR MR. PEACOCK:

You brought this on yourself!

I'm afraid my greatest trouble lies in finding three hundred words to say about myself. But let's get to the point:

BORN:

Leaksville, North Carolina, on the eighth day of August, in The Year Of My Gawd, 1916.

SUPPLEMENTARY EDUCATION:

(1) Course in Radio Engineering, taken in Los Angeles. (2) Course in the basic essentials of Radio Announcing, taken in Hollywood.

PROFESSIONAL OCCUPATIONS:

(1) Motion picture projectionist. (2) Drug Store Fizzician. (3) Artist. (4) Sign Painter. (5) Radio Engineer. (6) Radio Announcer. (7) The last time I looked at the bulletin board, I was Night News Editor at WGRC, along with announcing two radio shows on the Coast-to-Coast Mutual Network.

HOBBIES:

(1) Serious research into Demonology and allied subjects. (2) Experimentation with color and three-dimensional photography. (3) Trying to find a way to transmit power by radio. (Engineers laugh loud and long, please; I only hope you don't beat me to it!) (4) Reading and writing Science and Fantasy-Fiction.

AMBITIONS:

(1) To see Science-Fiction get out of the pulp stage and take its rightful place among the "slicks." (2) To be among those present on the first Interplanetary flight. (I am a firm believer in the eventuality of space flight.) (4) To clear up the question of whether or not travel is possible through Time.

IMMEDIATE FUTURE:

Completion of the Science-Fiction Novel of the Year. However, I will be a member of the United States Army before that happens, or, indeed, before this sees print in PLANET STORIES. There's still a job to be done ere those "Ambitions" can be realized.

My sincere thanks to you, Wilbur, and to the readers of PLANET STORIES for the very kind invitation to appear in "The Feature Flash."

Good luck to you—and to Science-Fiction!

Most Sincerely,

FRANCIS ELLIOTT.

MR. MEEK-MUSKETEER

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

Adventure flamed in Mr. Meek's timorous heart, the surge of battle and singing blades. And so, with a rocket-ship for his steed and a ray-gun for his sword, he sallied forth . . . carrying cavalier justice to the resentful shining stars.

Illustration by INGELS





The Prowler whirled from the shattered ship.

NOW that he'd done it, Oliver Meek found the thing he'd done hard to explain.

Under the calm, inquiring eyes of Mr. Richard Belmont, president of Lunar Exports, Inc., he stammered a little before he could get started.

"For years," he finally said, "I've been planning a trip . . ."

"But, Oliver," said Belmont, "we would give you a leave of absence. You'll be back. There's no reason to resign."

Oliver Meek shuffled his feet and looked uncomfortable, a little guilty.

"Maybe I won't be back," he declared. "You see, it isn't just an ordinary trip. It may take a long, long time. Something might happen. I'm going out to see the Solar System."

Belmont laughed lightly, reared back in his chair, matching fingertips. "Oh, yes. One of the tours. Nothing dangerous about them. Nothing at all. You needn't worry about that. I went on one a couple

of years ago. Mighty interesting. . . ."

"Not one of the tours," interrupted Meek. "Not for me. I have a ship of my own."

Belmont thumped forward in his chair, looking almost startled.

"A ship of your own!"

"Yes, sir," Oliver admitted, squirming uncomfortably. "Over thirty years I've saved for it . . . for it and the other things I'll need. It sort of got to be . . . well, an obsession, you might say."

"I see," said Belmont. "You planned it."

"Yes, sir, I planned it."

Which was a masterpiece of understatement.

For Belmont could not know and Oliver Meek, stoop-shouldered, white-haired bookkeeper, could not tell of those thirty years of thrift and dreams. Thirty years of watching ships of the void taking off from the space port, just outside the window where he sat hunched over ledgers and calculators. Thirty years of catching scraps of talk from the men who ran those ships. Men and ships with the alien dust of far off planets still clinging to their skins. Ships with strange marks and scars upon them, and men with strange words upon their tongues.

Thirty years of reducing high adventure to cold figures. Thirty years of recording strange cargoes and stranger tales into accounts. Thirty years of watching through a window while rockets, outbound, dug molten pits into the field. Thirty years of being on the edge, the very fringe of life . . . but *never* in it.

Nor could Belmont have guessed or Meek formed in words the romanticism that glowed within the middle-aged bookkeeper's heart . . . a thing that sometimes hurt . . . something earthbound that forever cried for space.

Nor the night classes Oliver Meek had attended to learn the theory of space navigation and after that more classes to gain an understanding of the motors and controls that drove the ships between the planets.

Nor how he had stood before the mirror in his room hour after hour, practicing, perfecting the art of pistol handling. Nor of the afternoons he had spent at the shooting gallery.

Nor of the nights he had read avidly,

soaking up the lore and information and color of those other worlds that seemed to beckon him.

"How old are you, Oliver?" asked Belmont.

"Fifty next month, sir," Meek answered.

"I wish you were taking one of the passenger ships," said Belmont. "Now, one of those tours aren't so bad. They're comfortable and . . ."

Meek shook his head and there was a stubborn glint in the weak blue eyes behind the thick lensed glasses.

"No tour for me, sir. I'm going to some of those places the tours never take you. I've missed a lot in these thirty years. I've waited a long time and now I'm going out and see the things I've dreamed about."

OLIVER MEEK pushed open the swinging doors of the Silver Moon and stepped timidly inside. Just through the door he stopped and stared, for the place hit him squarely in the face . . . the acrid smoke of Venusian leaf, the high-pitched laughter of the Martian dancing girls, the soft whirr of wheels, the click of balls as they bounced around the spinning wheels, the clatter of poker chips, the odor of strange liquors, the chirping and growling of a dozen tongues, the strange, exotic music of Ganymede.

Meek blinked through his heavy lenses, moved forward cautiously.

In the far corner of the place stood a table occupied by one man . . . an old, grizzled veteran of the Asteroids with his muzzle in a flagon of cheap beer.

Meek sidled toward the table, drew out a chair.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" he asked and Old Stiffy Grant choked on a mouthful of beer in his amazement.

"Go ahead, stranger," he finally croaked. "I don't give a dang. I don't own the joint."

Meek sat down on the edge of the chair. His eyes swept the room. He smelled the smoke, the raw liquor, the sweat-stained clothing of the men, the cheap perfumery of the dancing girls.

He shifted his gun belt so the two energy pistols hung more easily, and cautiously slid farther back upon the chair.

So this was Asteroid City on Juno. The place he'd read about. The place the pulp paper writers used as background for their more lurid tales. This was the place where guns flamed and men were found dead in the streets and a girl or a game of chance or just one spoken word could start a fight.

The tours didn't include places such as this. They took one to the nice, civilized places . . . towns like Gusta Pahn on Mars and Radium City on Venus and out to Satellite City on Ganymede. Civilized, polished places . . . places hardly different than New York or Chicago or Denver back home. But this was different . . . here one could sense something that made the blood run faster, made a thrill scamper up one's spine.

"You're new here, ain't you?" asked Stiffy.

Meek jumped, then recovered his composure.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I am. I always wanted to see this place. I read about it."

"Ever read about an Asteroid Prowler?" asked Stiffy.

"I believe I have somewhere. In a magazine section. A crazy story. . . ."

"It ain't crazy," protested Stiffy. "I saw one of them . . . this afternoon. Right here on Juno. None of these dad-blamed fools will believe me."

Furtively, Meek studied the man opposite him. He didn't seem to be such a bad fellow. Almost like any other human being. A little rough, maybe, but a good fellow just the same.

"Say," he suggested impulsively, "maybe you'd have a drink with me."

"You're dang tootin'," agreed Stiffy. "I never turn down no drinks."

"You order it," said Meek.

Stiffy bawled across the room. "Hey, Joe, bring us a couple snorts."

"What kind of an animal was this you were speaking off?" asked Meek.

"Asteroid Prowler," said Stiffy. "Most of these hoodlums don't think there is one, but I know different. I saw him this afternoon and he was the dad-blamest thing I ever laid my eyes on. He boiled right out from behind a big rock and started coming after me. I let him have one in the face but that didn't even nick him. Full-power, too. When that happened I didn't

waste no more time. I took it on the lam. Got to my ship and got out of there."

"What did he look like?"

STIFFY leaned across the table and wagged a forefinger solemnly. "Mister, you won't believe me when I tell you. But it's the truth, so help me. He had a beak. And eyes. Danged if them eyes weren't something. Like they were reaching out and trying to grab you. Not really reaching out, you know. But there was something in them that tried to talk to you. Big as plates and they shimmered like there was fire inside of them.

"These dod-rotted rock-blasters here laughed at me when I told them about it. Insinuated I held the truth lightly, they did. Laughed their fool heads off.

"It's pretty near as big as a house . . . that animal, and it's got a body like a barrel. It's got a long neck and a little head with big teeth. It's got a tail, too, and it's kind of set close to the ground. You see, I was out looking for the Lost Mine."

"Lost Mine?"

"Sure, ain't you ever heard of the Lost Mine?"

Stiffy blew beer in amazement.

Oliver Meek shook his head, feeling that probably he was the victim of tales reserved for the greenest of the tenderfeet, not knowing what he could do about it if he were.

Stiffy settled more solidly in his chair.

"The Lost Mine story," he declared, "has been going around for years. Seems a couple of fellows found it a few years after the first dome was built. They came in and told about it, stocked up with grub and went out. They never did come back."

He leaned across the table.

"You know what I think?" he demanded gustily.

"No," said Meek. "What do you think?"

"The Prowler got 'em," Stiffy said, triumphantly.

"But how could there be a lost mine?" asked Meek. "Asteroid City was one of the first mining domes built out here. There was no prospecting done until about that time."

Stiffy shook his head, wagging his beard.

"How should I know," he defended himself. "Maybe some early space traveler

set down here, dug a mine, never got back to Earth to tell about it."

"But Juno is only one hundred and eighteen miles in diameter," Meek argued. "If there had been a mine someone would have found it."

Stiffy snorted. "That's all you know about it, stranger. Only one hundred and eighteen miles, sure . . . but one hundred and eighteen miles of the worst danged country man ever set a boot on. Mostly up and down."

The drinks came, the bartender slapping them down on the table before them. Meek gasped first at their price, then choked on the drink itself. But he smothered the choke manfully and asked:

"What kind of stuff is this?"

"*Bocca*," replied Stiffy. "Good old Martian *bocca*. Puts hair on your chest."

He gulped his drink with gusto, blew noisily through his whiskers, eyed Meek disapprovingly.

"Don't you like it?" he demanded.

"Sure," lied Meek. "Sure I like it."

He shut his eyes and poured the liquor into his mouth, gulped fiercely, desperately, almost strangling.

Said Stiffy: "Tell you what let's do. Let's get into a game."

Meek opened his mouth to accept the invitation, then closed it, caution stealing over him. After all, he didn't know much about this place. Maybe he'd better go a little easy, at least at first.

He shook his head. "No, I'm not very good at cards. Just a few games of penny-ante now and then."

Stiffy looked his disbelief. "Penny ante," he said, then guffawed as if he sensed humor in what Meek had said. "Say, you're good," he roared. "Don't s'pose you can use them lightnin' throwers of yours either."

"Some," admitted Meek. "Practiced in front of a looking glass a little."

He wondered why Stiffy rolled in his chair with mirth until tears ran down into his whiskers.

STIFFY held a full house . . . aces with kings . . . and his eyes had the look of a cat stalking a saucer full of cream.

There were only two in the game, Stiffy and an oily gentleman called Luke. As the stakes mounted and the game grew

hotter the others at the table dropped out.

Standing behind Stiffy, Oliver Meek watched in awe, scarcely breathing.

Here was life . . . the kind of life one would never dream of back in the little cubby hole with its calculators and dusty books at Lunar Exports, Inc.

In the space of an hour, he had seen more money pass across the table than he had ever owned in all his life. Pots that climbed and pyramided, fortunes gambled on the flip of a single card.

But there was something else too . . . something wrong about the dealing. He couldn't figure quite what it was, but he had read an article about how gamblers dealt the cards when they didn't aim to give the other fellow quite an even break. And there had been something about Luke's dealing . . . something that he had read about in that article.

Across the table Luke grimaced.

"I'll have to call you," he announced.

"I'm afraid you're too strong for me."

Stiffy slapped down his hand triumphantly.

"Match that, dang you!" he exulted.

"The kind of cards I been waiting for all night."

He reached out a gnarled hand to rake in the coin but Luke stopped him with a gesture.

"Sorry," he said.

He flipped the cards down slowly, one at a time. First a trey, then a four and then three more fours.

Stiffy gulped, reached for the bottle.

But even as he did, Oliver Meek reached out and placed his hand upon the money on the table, fingers wide spread. He'd remembered what he had read in that article. . . .

"Just a minute, gentlemen," he said.

"I've remembered something. . . ."

Silence thudded in the room.

Meek looked across the table straight into the eyes of Luke.

Luke said: "You better explain yourself, mister."

Meek suddenly was flustered. "Why, maybe I acted too hastily. It really was nothing. I just noticed something about the deal. . . ."

Luke jerked erect, kicking his chair away with the single motion of rising. The crowd suddenly surged away, out of the

line of fire. The bartender ducked behind the bar. Stiffy flung himself with a howl out of his chair, skidded along the floor.

Meek, suddenly straightening from the table, saw Luke's hand streaking for the gun at his belt and in a split second he realized that here he faced a situation that demanded action.

He didn't think about those days of practice in front of the mirror. He didn't call upon a single iota of the gun-lore he had read in hundreds of books. His mind, for a bare instant, was almost a blank, but he acted as if by instinct.

His hands moved like driving pistons, snapped the twin guns from their holsters, heaved them clear of leather, grabbed them in mid-air.

He saw Luke's gun muzzle swinging up, tilted down the muzzle of his own left gun, pressed the activator. There was a screeching hiss, a streak of blue that crackled in the air and the gun that Luke held in his hand was suddenly red hot.

But Meek wasn't watching Luke. His eyes were for the crowd and even as he pressed the firing button he saw a hand pick a bottle off the bar, lift it to throw. The gun in his right hand shrieked and the bottle smashed into a million pieces, the liquor turned to steam.

Slowly Meek backed away, his tread almost cat-like, his weak blue eyes like cold ice behind the thick lensed spectacles, his hunched shoulders still hunched, his lean jaw like a steel trap.

He felt the wall at his back and stopped.

Out in the room before him no one stirred. Luke stood like a statue, gripping his right hand, badly burned by the smoking gun that lay at his feet. Luke's face was a mask of hatred.

The rest of them simply stared. Stared at this outlander. A man who wore clothing such as the Asteroid Belt had never seen before. A man who looked as if he might be a clerk or even a retired farmer out on a holiday. A man with glasses and hunched shoulders and a skin that had never known the touch of sun in space.

And yet a man who had given Luke Blaine a head start for his gun, had beaten him to the draw, had burned the gun out of his hand.

Oliver Meek heard himself speaking, but he couldn't believe it was himself. It

was as if some other person had taken command of his tongue, was forcing it to speak. He hardly recognized his voice, for it was hard and brittle and sounded far away.

It was saying: "Does anyone else want to argue with me?"

It was immediately apparent no one did.

II

OLIVER MEEK tried to explain it carefully, but it was hard when people were so insistent. Hard, too, to collect his thoughts so early in the day.

He sat on the edge of the bed, white hair tousled, his night shirt wrinkled, his bony legs sticking out beneath it.

"But I'm not a gun fighter," he declared. "I'm just on a holiday. I never shot at a man before in all my life. I can't imagine what came over me."

The Rev. Harold Brown brushed his argument aside.

"Don't you see, sir," he insisted, "what you can do for us? These hoodlums will respect you. You can clean up the town for us. Blacky Hoffman and his mob run the place. They make decent government and decent living impossible. They levy protection tribute on every businessman, they rob and cheat the miners and prospectors who come here, they maintain vice conditions. . . ."

"All you have to do," said Andrew Smith brightly, "is run Blacky and his gang out of town."

"But," protested Meek, "you don't understand."

"Five years ago," the Rev. Brown went on, disregarding him, "I would have hesitated to pit force against force. It is not my way nor the way of the church . . . but for five years I've tried to bring the gospel to this place, have worked for better conditions and each year I see them steadily getting worse."

"This could be a swell place," enthused Smith, "if we could get rid of the undesirables. Fine opportunities. Capital would come in. Decent people could settle. We could have some civic improvements. Maybe a Rotary club."

Meek wiggled his toes despairingly.

"You would earn the eternal gratitude of Asteroid City," urged the Rev. Brown.

"We've tried it before but it never worked."

"They always killed our man," Smith explained, "or he got scared, or they bought him off."

"We never had a man like you before," the Rev. Brown declared. "Luke Blaine is a notorious gunman. No one, ever before, has been able to beat him to . . ."

"There must be some mistake," insisted Meek. "I'm just a bookkeeper. I don't know a thing. . . ."

"We'd swear you in as marshal," said Smith. "The office is vacant now. Has been for three months or more. We can't find anyone to take it."

"But I'm not staying long," protested Meek. "I'm leaving pretty soon. I just want to try to get a look at the Asteroid Prowler and scout around to see if I can't find some old rocks I read about once."

The two visitors stared open mouthed at him. Meek brightened. "You've heard about those old rocks, maybe. Some funny inscriptions on them. Fellow who found them thought they had been made recently, probably just before Earthmen first came here. But no one can read them. Maybe some other race . . . from somewhere far away."

"But it won't take you long," pleaded Smith. "We got warrants for all of them. All you got to do is serve them."

"Look," said Meek in desperation, "you have got me wrong. It must have been an accident, shooting that gun out of Mr. Blaine's hand."

Meek felt dull anger stirring within him. What right did these people have of insisting that he help them with their troubles? What did they think he was? A desperado or space runner? Another gangster? Just because he'd been lucky at the Silver Moon.

"By gosh," he declared flatly, "I just won't do it!"

They looked pained, rose reluctantly.

"I suppose we shouldn't have expected that you would," said the Reverend Brown biting.

THE Silver Moon was quiet. The bartender was languidly wiping the top of the bar. A Venusian boy was as languidly sweeping out. The dancing girls were gone, the music was silent.

Stiffy and Oliver Meek were among the few customers.

Stiffy gulped a drink and blew fiercely through his whiskers.

"Oliver," he said, "you sure are a ring-tailed bearcat with them guns of yours. I wonder, would you tell me how you do it?"

"Look here, Mr. Grant," said Meek. "I wish you'd quit talking about what I did. It was just an accident, anyhow. What I'm mainly interested in is this Asteroid Prowler you were telling me about. Is there any chance I might find him if I went out and looked?"

Stiffy choked, almost purple with astonishment.

"Good gravy," he said, "now you want to go out and tangle with the Prowler!"

"Not tangle with him," Meek declared. "Just look at him."

"Mister," Stiffy warned, "the best way to look at that thing is with a telescope. A good, powerful telescope."

The swinging doors swung open and a man walked in.

The newcomer walked directly toward the table occupied by Stiffy and Meek. He halted beside it, black beard jutting fearfully, eyes bleakly cold.

"I'm Blacky Hoffman," he said. "I suppose you're Meek." He disregarded Stiffy.

Meek stood up and held out his hand.

"Glad to know you, Mr. Hoffman," he said.

Blacky took the proffered hand in some surprise.

"Seems I should know you, Meek, but I don't. Should have heard of you at some time or other. A man like you would get talked about."

Meek shook his head. "I don't think you ever have. I never did anything to get talked about."

"Sit down," said Hoffman and it sounded like a command.

"I got to be going," Stiffy piped, already halfway to the door.

Hoffman poured out a drink and shoved the bottle at Meek. Meek gritted his teeth and poured a short one.

"No use beating around the bush," said Blacky. "We may as well get down to cases. I guess we understand one another."

Oiver Meek didn't know what the other meant, but he had to say something.

"I guess we do," he agreed.

"All right, then," said Hoffman. "I've built up a sweet little racket here and I don't like fellows butting in."

Meek essayed to down his liquor, succeeded, gasped for breath.

"But I could use a man like you," said Hoffman. "Luke tells me you are handy with the blasters."

"I practice sometimes," Meek admitted.

A smile twitched Hoffman's bearded lips. "We have the town just where we want it. The officials can't do a thing. Scared to. Marshals always eat rock or skip town. Maybe you would like to throw in with us. Not much to do, easy pickings."

"I'm sorry," said Meek, "but I can't do that."

"Listen, Meek," warned Hoffman, "you're either with us or you aren't. We don't like chiselers here. We know what to do with guys who try to muscle in. I don't know who you are or where you come from, but I'm telling you this . . . straight. If you don't come in, all right . . . but if you stick around after tonight I can't promise you protection."

Meek was silent, mulling the threat.

"You mean," he finally asked, "that you're ordering me out if I don't join your gang?"

Hoffman nodded. "That, big boy, is just exactly what I mean."

Slow anger and resentment ate at Meek. Who was this Hoffman to order him out of Asteroid City? This was a free Solar System, wasn't it? No wonder the Rev. Brown was jittery. No wonder the decent people wanted a clean-up.

Meek's anger mounted, a cold deadly anger that shook him like a frigid hand. An anger that almost frightened him, for very seldom in his life had he been really angry.

He rose slowly from the table, hitched his gun belt to a comfortable position.

"The town's been without a marshal for a long time, hasn't it?" he asked.

Hoffman's laugh boomed out. "You bet it has. And it's going to stay that way. The last one took it on the lam. The one before that got killed. The one

before that sort of disappeared. . . ."

Meek spoke slowly, weak eyes burning.

"Horrible condition," he said. "Something's got to be done about it."

THE streets were deserted, quiet, a deadly quiet that lurked and hovered, waiting for something to happen.

Oliver Meek polished his marshal's star with his coat sleeve, glanced up at the dome. Stars glittered, their light distorted by the heavy quartz. Stars in a dead black sky.

Bathed in the weak starlight, the mighty walls of the canyon reared above the dome. A canyon, the only sort of place where a city could rise on one of the planetoids. For the walls protected the dome against the deadly barrage of whizzing debris that continually shrieked down from space. Those mighty cragged mountains and dizzy cliffs were pocked with the blows dealt, through long eons, by that hail of armor-piercing projectiles.

Meek returned his gaze to the street, saw the lights of the Silver Moon. Nervously he felt of the papers in his inside pocket. Warrants for the arrest of John Hoffman for murder, Luke Blaine for murder, Jim Smithers for reckless shooting, Jake Loomis for assault and battery, Robert Blake for robbery.

And suddenly, Oliver Meek was afraid. For death waited him, he knew, inside the swinging doors of the Silver Moon. A death preluded by this quiet street.

Almost as if he were awaking from a dream, he found questions filling his brain. What was he doing here? Why had he gotten himself into a jam like this? What difference did it make to him what happened to Asteroid City?

It had been anger that had made him do it . . . that unaccountable anger which had flared when Hoffman told him to get out.

After all, what difference would a few days make? He was going to leave anyhow. He'd seen about all there was to see in Asteroid City. He wanted to see the Prowler and the stones with the strange inscriptions on them, but they were sights he could get along without.

If he turned around and walked the other way he could reach his space ship in just a few minutes. There was fuel

enough to take him to Ganymede. No one would know until he was already gone. And after he was gone, what he care what anybody thought?

He stood irresolutely, arguing with himself. Then he shook his head, resumed his march toward the Silver Moon.

A figure stepped from a dark doorway. Meek saw the threatening gleam of steel. His hands streaked toward his gun-butts, but something prodded him in the back and he froze, fingers touching metal.

"All right, marshal," said a mocking voice. "You just turn around and walk the other way."

He felt his guns lifted from their holsters and he turned around and walked. Footsteps crunched beside him and behind him, but otherwise he walked in silence.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked, his voice just a trifle shaky.

One of the men laughed.

"Just on a little trip, marshal. Out to take a look at Juno. It's a right pretty sight at night."

JUNO wasn't pretty. For the most part, there was little of it one could see. The stars shed little light and the depressions were in shadow, while the cragged mountain tops seemed like shimmering mirages in the ghostly starlight.

The ship lay on a plateau between a needle-like range and a deep, shadowed valley.

"Now, marshal," said one of the men, "you stay right here. You'll see the Sun come up over that mountain back there. Interesting. Dawn on Juno is something to remember."

Meek started forward, but the other waved him back with his pistol.

"You're leaving me here?" shrieked Meek.

"Why sure," the man said. "You wanted to see the Solar System, didn't you?"

They backed away from him, guns in hand. Frozen in terror, he watched them enter the ship, saw the port close. An instant later the ship roared away, the backwash of its tubes buffeting Meek to the ground.

He struggled to his feet, watching the blasting tubes until they were out of sight. Clumsily he stepped forward and then

stopped. There was no place to go . . . nothing to do.

Loneliness and fear swept over him in terrible waves of anguish. Fear that dwarfed any emotion he had ever felt. Fear of the ghostly shimmer of the peaks, fear of the shadow-blackened valley, fear of space and the mad, cold intensity of unwinking stars.

He fought for a grip on himself. It was fear such as this that drove men mad in space. He'd read about that, heard about it. Fear of the loneliness and the terrible depths of space . . . fear of the indifference of endless miles of void, fear of the unknown that always lurked just at elbow distance.

"Meek," he told himself, "you should have stayed at home."

Dawn came shortly, but no such dawn as one would see on Earth. Just a gradual dimming of the stars, a gradual lifting of the blacker darkness as a larger star, the Sun, swung above the peaks.

The stars still shone, but a gray light filtered over the landscape, made the mountains solid things instead of ghostly shapes.

Jagged peaks loomed on one side of the plateau, fearsome depths on the other. A meteor thudded somewhere to his right and Meek shuddered. There was no sound of the impact but he could feel the vibrations of the blow as the whizzing mass struck the cliffs.

But it was foolish to be afraid of meteors, he told himself. He had greater and more immediate worries.

There were less than eight hours of air left in the tanks of his space suit. He had no idea where he was, although he knew that many miles of rugged, fearsome country stretched between him and Asteroid City.

The space suit carried no food and no water, but that was of minor moment, he realized, for his air would give out long before he felt the pangs of thirst or hunger.

He sat down on a massive boulder and tried to think. There wasn't much to think about. Everywhere his thoughts met black walls. The situation, he told himself, was hopeless.

If only he hadn't come to Asteroid City in the first place! Or having come, if he had only minded his business, this never

would have happened. If he hadn't been so anxious to show off what he knew about card dealing tricks. If only he hadn't agreed to be sworn in as marshal. If he'd swallowed his pride and left when Hoffman told him to.

He brushed away such thoughts as futile, took stock of his surroundings.

The cliff on the right hand side was undercut, overhanging several hundred feet of level ground.

Ponderously, he heaved himself off the boulder, wandered aimlessly up the wider tongue of plateau. The undercut, he saw, grew deeper, forming a deep cleft, as if someone had furrowed out the mountain side. Heavy shadows clung within it.

Suddenly he stopped, riveted to the ground, scarcely daring to breathe.

Something was moving in the deep shadow of the undercut. Something that seemed to glint faintly with reflected light.

The thing lurched forward and, in the fleeting instant before he turned and ran, Oliver Meek had an impression of a barrel-like body, a long neck, a cruel mouth, monstrous eyes that glowed with hidden fires.

There was no speculation in Oliver Meek's mind. From the description given him by Stiffy, from the very terror of the thing, he knew the being shambling toward him was the Asteroid Prowler.

With a shriek of pure fear, Meek turned and fled and behind him came the Prowler, its head swaying on the end of its whip-like neck.

MEEL'S legs worked like pistons, his breath gasping in his throat, his body soaring through space as he covered long distances at each leap under the influence of lesser gravity.

Thunderous blasts hammered at the ear-phones in his helmet and as he ran he craned his head skyward.

Shooting down toward the plateau, forward rockets braking, was a small spaceship!

Hope rose within him and he glanced back over his shoulder. Hope died instantly. The Prowler was gaining on him, gaining fast.

Suddenly his legs gave out. Simply folded up, worn out with the punishment

they had taken. He threw up his arms to shield his helmet plate and sobbed in panic.

The Asteroid Prowler would get him now. Sure as shooting. Just at the minute rescue came, the Prowler would get him.

But the Prowler didn't get him. Nothing happened at all. Surprised, he sat up and spun around, crouching.

The ship had landed, almost at the edge of the plateau and a man was tumbling out of the port. The Prowler had changed his course, was galloping toward the ship.

The man from the ship ran in leaping bounds, a pistol in one gloved hand, and his yelp of terror rang in Meek's ear-phones.

"Run, dang you. Run! That dad-blamed Prowler will be after us any minute now."

"Stiffy," yelled Meek. "Stiffy, you came out to get me."

Stiffy landed beside him, hauled him to his feet.

"Dang right I came to get you," he panted. "I thought them hoodlums would be up to some dirty tricks, so I stuck around and watched."

He jerked at Meek's arm.

"Come on, Oliver, we got to get along."

But Meek jerked his arm away.

"Look what he's doin!" he shouted.

"Just look at him!"

The Prowler seemed to be bent on systematic destruction of the space ship. His jaws were ripping at the steel plating . . . Ripping at it and tearing it away, peeling it off the frame as one might peel an orange.

"Hey," howled Stiffy. "You can't do that. Get out of there, you danged . . ."

The Prowler turned to look at them, a heavy power cable in its mouth.

"You'll be electrocuted," yelled Stiffy. "Danged if it won't serve you right."

But, far from being electrocuted, the Prowler seemed to be enjoying himself. He sucked at the power cable and his eyes eyes glowed blissfully.

Stiffy flourished his pistol.

"Get away," he yelled. "Get away or I'll blister your danged hide."

Almost playfully the Prowler minced away from the ship, feet dancing.

"He did it!" said Meek.

"Did what?" Stiffy scowled bewilderedly.

"Got away from that ship, just like you told him to."

Stiffy snorted. "Don't ever kid yourself he did it because I told him to. He couldn't even hear me, probably. Living out here like this, he wouldn't have anything to hear with. Probably he's just trying to decide which one of us he'll catch first. Better be ready to kick you up some dust."

The Prowler trotted toward them, head bobbing up and down.

"Get going," Stiffy yelled at Meek and brought up his pistol. A blue shaft of light whipped out, smacked the Prowler in the head, but the Prowler didn't even falter in his stride. The energy charge seemed to have no power at all. It didn't even spatter . . . it looked as if the blue pencil of raging death was boring straight into the spread of forehead between the monstrous eyes.

"Run, you danged fool," Stiffy screeched at Meek. "I can't hold him off."

But Meek didn't run . . . instead he sprang straight into the Prowler's path, arm upraised.

"Stop!" he yelled.

III

THE Prowler skidded to a stop, his metal hooves leaving scratches on the solid rock.

For a moment the three of them stood stock still, Stiffy's jaw hanging in astonishment.

Meek reached out a hand and patted the Prowler's massive shoulder.

"Good boy," he said. "Good boy."

"Come away from there!" Stiffy yelled in sudden terror. "Just one good gulp and that guy would have you."

"Ah, shucks," said Meek, "he won't hurt anybody. He's only hungry, that's all."

"That," declared Stiffy, "is just what I'm afraid of."

"You don't understand," insisted Meek. "He isn't hungry for us. He's starved for energy. Give him another shot from the gun."

Stiffy stared at the gun hanging in his hand.

"You're sure it wouldn't make him sore?" he asked.

"Gosh, no," said Meek. "That's what he wants. He soaks it up. Didn't you notice how the beam went right into him, without spattering or anything. And the way he sucked that power cable. He drained your ship of every drop of energy it had."

"He did what?" yelled Stiffy.

"He drained the ship of energy. That's what he lives on. That's why he chased you. He wanted you to keep on shooting."

Stiffy clapped a hand to his forehead.

"We're sunk for certain, now," he declared. "There might have been a chance to get back with just a few plates ripped off the ship. But with all the energy gone . . ."

"Hey, Stiffy," yelled Meek, "take a look at this."

Stiffy moved nearer, cautiously.

"What you got now?" he demanded irritably.

"These marks on his shoulder," said Meek. His gloved finger shook excitedly as he pointed. "They're the same kind of marks as were on those stones I read about in the book. Marks no one could read. Fellow who wrote the book figured they were made by some other race that had visited Juno. Maybe a race from outside the Solar System, even."

"Good gravy," said Stiffy, in awe, "you don't think . . ."

"Sure, I do," Meek declared with the air of a man who is sure of his knowledge. "A race came here one time and they had the Prowler along. For some reason they left him. Maybe he was just a robot and they didn't have room for him, or maybe something happened to them . . ."

"Say," said Stiffy, "I bet you that's just what he is. A robot. Attuned to thought waves. That's why he minds you."

"That's what I figured," Meek agreed. "Thought waves would be the same, no matter who thought them . . . human being or a . . . well . . . or something else."

A sudden thought struck Stiffy. "Maybe them guys found the Lost Mine! By cracky, that would be something, wouldn't it? Maybe this critter could lead us to it."

"Maybe?" Meek said doubtfully.

Meek patted the Prowler's rocky shoulder gently, filled with wonder. In some

ungussed time, in some unknown sector of space, the Prowler had been fashioned by an alien people. For some reason they had made him, for some reason they had left him here. Abandonment or purpose?

Meek shook his head. That would be something to puzzle over later, something to roll around in his brain on some monotonous flight into the maw of space.

Space! Startled at the thought clanging on his brain he jerked a quick glance upward, saw the bleak stars staring at him. Eyes that seemed to be laughing at him, cruel, ironic laughter.

"Stiffy," he whispered. "Stiffy, I just thought of something."

"Yeah, what is it?"

Stark terror walked in Meek's words. "My oxygen tank is better than half gone. And the ship is wrecked. . . ."

"Cripes," said Stiffy, "I guess we just forgot. We sure are behind the eight ball. Somehow we got to get back to Asteroid City. And we got to get there quick."

Meek's eyes brightened. "Stiffy, maybe . . . Maybe we could ride the Prowler."

Stiffy backed away. But Meek reached out and grasped his arm. "Come on. It's the only way, Stiffy. We have to get there and the Prowler can take us."

"But . . . but . . . but . . ." Stiffy stammered.

"Give me a leg up," Meek ordered.

Stiffy complied and Meek leaped astride the broad metal back, reached down and hauled Stiffy aboard.

"Get going, you flea-bitten nag!" Meek yipped, in sudden elation.

There was reason for elation. Not until that moment had he stopped to consider the Prowler might object to being ridden. Might consider it an insult.

The Prowler apparently was astonished, but that was all. He shook his head in bewilderment and weaved his neck around as if he wasn't quite sure just what to do. But at least he hadn't started to take the place apart.

"Giddap!" yelled Stiffy, bringing the butt of his pistol down.

The Prowler jiggled a little, then gathered himself together and started. The landscape blurred with speed as he leaped a mighty boulder, skipped along a narrow ledge around a slick-faced mountain, skidded a hairpin turn.

Meek and Stiffy fought desperately to hang on. The metal back was slick and broad and there weren't any handholds. They bounced and thumped, almost fell off a dozen times.

"Stiffy," yelled Meek, "how do we know he's taking us to Asteroid City?"

"Don't fret about that," said Stiffy. "He knows where we want to go. He read our mind."

"I hope so," Meek said, prayerfully.

The Prowler whished around a right angle turn on a narrow ledge and the distant peaks wheeled sickeningly against the sky.

Meek lay flat on his belly and hugged the Prowler's sides. The mountains whistled past. He stole a look at the jagged peaks on the near horizon and they looked like a tight board fence.

OLIVER MEEK fought manfully to get back his composure as the Prowler pranced down the main street of Asteroid City.

The sidewalks were lined with hundreds of staring faces, faces that drooped in astonishment and disbelief.

Stiffy was yelling at someone. "Now, doggone you, will you believe there is a Prowler?"

And the man he yelled at didn't have a word to say, just stood and stared.

In the swarm of faces, Meek saw those of the Reverend Harold Brown and Andrew Smith and, almost as if in a dream, he waved jauntily to them. At least, he hoped the wave was jaunty. Wouldn't do to let them know his knees were too weak to hold him up.

Smith waved back and shouted something, but the Reverend Brown's jaw hung open and he seemed too wonder-struck to move.

This, thought Meek, is the kind of things you read about. The conquering hero coming home astride his mighty charger. Only the conquering hero, he remembered with a sudden twinge, usually was a young lad who sat straight in the saddle instead of an old man with shoulders hunched from thirty years of poring over dusty ledgers.

A man was stepping out into the street, a man who carried a gun in hand and suddenly Meek realized they were abreast of the Silver Moon.

The armed man was Blacky Hoffman.

Here, thought Meek, is where I get it. This is what I get for playing the big shot . . . for being a smart alec, for remembering how cards shouldn't be dealt and for shooting a man's gun out of his hand and letting myself be talked into being a marshal.

But he sat stiff and as straight as he could on the Prowler and kept his eyes on Hoffman. That was the only way to do. That was the way all the heroes did in the stories he had read. And doggone, he was a hero. Whether he liked it or not, he was one.

The street was hushed with sudden tension and the very air seemed to be crackling with the threat of direful happenings.

Hoffman's voice rang crisply through the stillness.

"Go for your blasters, Meek!"

"I have no blasters," Meek told him calmly. "Your hoodlums took them from me."

"Borrow Stiffy's," snapped Hoffman, and added, with a nasty laugh: "You won't need them long."

Meek nodded, watching Hoffman narrowly. Slowly he reached back for Stiffy's gun. He felt it in his hand, wrapped his fingers tightly around it.

Funny, he thought, how calm he was. Like he had been in the Silver Moon that night. There was something about a gun. It changed him, turned him into another man.

He didn't have a chance, he knew. Hoffman would shoot before he could ever get the gun around. But despite that, he felt foolishly sure. . . .

Hoffman's gun flashed in the weak sunlight, blooming with blue brilliance.

For an instant, a single fraction of a second, Meek saw the flash of the beam straight in his eyes, but even before he could involuntarily flinch, the beam had bent. True to its mark, it would have drilled Meek straight between the eyes . . . but it didn't go straight to its mark. Instead, it bent and slapped itself straight between the Prowler's eyes.

And the Prowler danced a little jig of happiness as the blue spear of energy knifed into its metal body.

"Cripes," gasped Stiffy, "he draws it! He ain't satisfied with just taking it when

you give it to him. He reaches out and gets it. Just like a lightning rod reaching up and grabbing lightning."

Puzzlement flashed across Hoffman's face, then incredulity and finally something that came close to fear. The gun's beam snapped off and his hands sagged. The gun dropped in the dust. The Prowler stood stock still.

"Well, Hoffman?" Meek asked quietly and his voice seemed to run all along the street.

Hoffman's face twitched.

"Get down and fight like a man," he rasped.

"No," said Meek, "I won't do that. Because it wouldn't be man to man. It would be me against your entire gang."

Hoffman started to back away, slowly, step by furtive step. Step by step the Prowler stalked him there in the silent street.

Then Hoffman, with a scream of terror, broke and ran.

"Get him!" Meek roared at the Prowler.

The Prowler, with one lightning lunge, one flip of its whip-like neck, got him. Got him, gently, as Meek had meant he should.

HOWLING in mingled rage and terror, Hoffman dangled by the seat of his pants from the Prowler's beak. Neatly as any circus horse, the Prowler wheeled and trotted back to the Silver Moon, carrying Hoffman with a certain gentle grace that was not lost upon the crowd.

Hoffman quieted and the crowd's jeers rang against the dome. The Prowler pranced a bit, jiggled Hoffman up and down.

Meek raised a hand for silence, spoke to Hoffman. "O.K., Mr. Hoffman, call out your men. All of them. Out into the middle of the street. Where we can see them."

Hoffman swore at him.

"Jiggle him some," Meek told the Prowler. The Prowler jiggled him and Hoffman bawled and clawed at empty air.

"Damn you," shrieked Hoffman, "get out into the street. All of you. Just like he said."

No one stirred.

"Blaine," yelled Hoffman. "Get out there! You, too Smithers. Loomis. Blake!"

They came slowly, shame-faced. At a command from Meek they unholstered their blasters and heaved them in a pile.

The Prowler deposited Hoffman with them.

Meek saw Andrew Smith standing at the edge of the sidewalk and nodded to him. "There you are, Mr. Smith. Rounded up, just like you wanted them."

"Neat," said Stiffy, "but not gaudy."

Slowly, carefully, bones aching, Meek slid from the Prowler's back, was surprised his legs would hold him up.

"Come in and have a drink," yelled a dozen voices all at once.

"Bet your life," agreed Stiffy, licking his chops.

Men were slapping Meek on the back, yelling at him. Yelling friendly things, calling him an old he-wolf.

He tried to thrust out his chest but didn't succeed too well. He hoped they wouldn't insist on his drinking of lot of *bocca*.

A hand tugged at Meek's elbow. It was the Reverend Brown.

"You aren't going to leave that beast out here all alone?" he asked. "No telling what he might do."

"Ah, shucks," protested Stiffy, "he's gentle as a kitten. Stands without hitching."

But even as he spoke, the Prowler lifted his head, almost as if he were sniffing, started down the street at a swinging trot.

"Hey," yelled Stiffy, "come back here, you cross-eyed crow-bait!"

The Prowler didn't falter in his stride. He went even faster.

Cold fear gripped Meek by the throat. He tried to speak and gulped instead. He'd just thought of something. The power plant that supplied Asteroid City with its power and light, the very oxygen it breathed, was down that way.

A power plant and an alien robot that was starved for energy!

"My stars!" gasped Meek.

He shook off the minister's hand and galloped down the street, shrieking at the Prowler. But the Prowler had no thought of stopping.

Panting, Meek slowed from a gallop to a trot, then to a labored walk. Behind him, he heard Stiffy puffing along. Be-

hind Stiffy trailed practically the entire population of Asteroid City.

Far ahead came the sound of rending steel and crashing structure as the Prowler ripped the plant apart to get at the juice.

Stiffy gained Meek's side and panted at him. "Cripes, they'll crucify us for this. We got to get him out of there."

"How?" asked Meek.

"Danged if I know," said Stiffy.

One side of the plant as a mass of tangled wreckage, surrounding a hole out of which protruded the Prowler's hind quarters. Terrified workers and maintenance men were running for their lives. Live wires spat and crackled with flaming energy.

IV

MEEK and Stiffy halted a half block away, breath whistling in their throats. The Prowler's tail, protruding from the hole in the side of the plant, twitched happily. Meek regarded the scene with doleful thoughts.

"I wish," Stiffy declared, "we'd stayed out there and died. It would have been easier than what's liable to happen to us now."

Feet thumped behind them and a hand grabbed Meek's shoulder, grabbed it. It was Andrew Smith, a winded, apoplectic Andrew Smith.

"What are you going to do?" he shouted at Meek.

Meek swallowed hard, tried to make his voice even. "Just studying over the situation, Mr. Smith. I'll figure out something in a minute."

"Sure he will," insisted Stiffy. "Leave him alone. Give him time. He always does what he says he'll do. He said he'd round up Blacky for you, and he did. He went out single-handed and captured the Prowler. He . . ."

"Yeah," yelled Smith, "and he said the Prowler would stand without hitching, too. And did he stand? I ask you . . ."

"He didn't say that," Stiffy interrupted, testily, "I said that."

"It don't make a bit of difference who said it," shrieked Smith. "I got stock in that plant there. And the Prowler's ruining it. He's jeopardizing the life of this whole city. And it's all your fault. You

brought him here. I'll sue you, the both of you, so help me . . ."

"Ah, shut up," snapped Stiffy. "Who can think with you blabbering around?"

Smith danced in rage. "Who's blabbering? I got a good mind to . . ."

He doubled up his fist and started toward Stiffy.

And once again Oliver Meek did something he never would have thought of doing back on Earth. He put out his gloved hand, deliberately, and pushed Smith in the face. Pushed hard, so hard that Smith thumped down in the dust of the street and sat there, silenced by surprise.

Without even looking back, Meek strode purposefully down the street toward the Prowler. What he meant to do he did not know. What he possibly could do he had no idea. But anything was better than standing there while the crowd screamed at him and men shook their fists at him.

Why, they might even lynch him! He shivered at the thought. But men still did things like that. Especially when someone monkeyed around with the very things they depended on for life out here in naked space. Maybe they'd turn him out on Juno with only an hour or two of oxygen. Maybe they'd . . .

Stiffy was yelling at him. "Come back, you danged old fool . . ."

Suddenly the ground leaped and bucked beneath Meek's feet. The power plant reeled before his startled eyes and then, somehow, he was on his back, watching the dome wheel and weave above him.

Fighting for breath that had been knocked out of him, he clawed his way to his knees, tried to stand erect, but the ground still was crawling with motion.

It was like an earthquake, he told himself, startled that he could even think. But it couldn't be an earthquake. Juno didn't have earthquakes, there was no reason for Juno to have earthquakes. The little planetoid eons ago had cooled through and through, each rock, each strata had found its place. Juno was dead, dead as the reaches of space itself, and earthquakes don't happen on dead planets.

Out of the corner of his eyes he saw the Prowler had backed out of the hole in the power plant, was standing with four legs

spread wide, bracing himself. His long neck was stretched high in the air and the ugly, toothy head had the look of quick alertness.

Meek gained his feet, stood tottering, keeping upright by some fancy footwork. The Prowler started toward him, legs gathering speed, heading down the street.

With a hoarse whoop, Meek steadied himself, half crouched and held his breath over the beast's broad back. Sprawling, he leaped, leaped so hard he almost vaulted over the beast's broad back. Sprawling, he scrambled into position astride the running robot, saw Stiffy leaping at him. Quickly he shot out a hand, grasped Stiffy and hauled him aboard.

Ahead of them the crowd rushed for safety, leaving a broad avenue for the storming Prowler and his two riders.

"Get the locks open," yelled Stiffy. "Here we come!"

The crowd took up the shriek. "Get the locks open!"

THE Prowler swept down the street, hoofs clattering like hammer blows. Aheads of them the inner lock swung open. As the Prowler bulleted into the entrance tunnel, the outer lock swung out and for a few wild seconds air screamed and howled, rushing from the city into the vacuum of space.

In frantic haste, Meek and Stiffy worked with their helmets, getting them clamped down. Then they were out in the open, the gleaming city behind them.

Less than half a mile away loomed a massive boulder towering a hundred feet or more above the level of the canyon floor. The Prowler made a beeline for it.

"Oliver," yelled Stiffy, "that thing wasn't there before. Look, it almost blocks the canyon!"

The boulder was black but it crawled with a greenish glow, a faint network of somber fire.

The breath caught in Meek's throat.

"Stiffy," he whispered.

Behind him, Stiffy almost sobbed in excitement. "Yeah, I know. It's a meteor. And it's lousy with radium."

"It just fell," said Meek, voice unsteady. "That's what shook up the place. Wonder is it didn't crack the dome wide open."

"We better jump for it," urged Stiffy, "if we don't want to get plumb burned. Can't go near that thing without lead sheathing."

Meek flung himself sidewise, throwing up his arms to shield his helmet, struck on his shoulders and rolled. Slowly, benumbed from the fall, he crept out of the shadow of a high rock wall into the starlight.

Stiffy was sitting on the ground, rubbing his shins.

"Barked them up some," he admitted.

Up the valley the Prowler was arching its back and rubbing against the green-glowing boulder.

"Just like a dad-blamed cat that has found some catnip," said Stiffy. "Must sort of like that radium."

He rose slowly, dusted off his suit.

"Well," he suggested, "let's you and me go into action."

"Action?"

"Sure. Let's go back and file us a claim on that meteor. Don't need to worry about anybody else jumping it, cause every dad-blamed one of them is scared speechless of the Prowler. They won't go near the meteor long as he's around."

Meek stared at the meteor speculatively. "That's worth a lot of money, isn't it, Stiffy? Filled with radium like that."

"Bet your boots," said Stiffy cheerfully. "We go fifty-fifty on her. Split equal ways. We're pardners."

"Tell you what you do," Meek said slowly. "You take it all. Just take out enough to fix up the damage back there and call that my share."

Stiffy's jaw drooped. "Say, what you getting at?"

"I'm leaving," said Meek.

"Good gravy! Leaving! And just when we made us a strike."

"You don't understand," said Meek. "I didn't come out here to find radium. Or to arrest gangs. Or even to capture an Asteroid Prowler. I just came out to look around. Nice and quiet. Didn't want to bother anybody. Didn't want anybody to bother me."

"Doggone it," said Stiffy, "and I was just figuring maybe, soon as we cleaned up the radium, we might get that Prowler to lead us to the Lost Mine."

MEEK brightened. "I have a hunch I know where that Lost Mine is, Stiffy. Remember there was a cut-back in the cliff near where we found the Prowler. Well, when I first saw him, he was in that place. Got a hunch maybe that's the mine."

Stiffy grinned. "So you're sticking with me."

Meek shook his head. "No, I'm still leaving."

"Just like that?" said Stiffy.

Stiffy held out his hand, "O.K., if that's what you want to do. I'll bank your half in the First Martian bank on Earth. Leave my address there. Might want to get in touch with me some time."

Meek gripped his hand. "You don't need to do that. Take all of it. Just see the plant's fixed up."

Stiffy's eyes shone queerly, moistly in the starlight. "Shucks, there's enough for both of us. More than enough." His voice was rough. "Now get along with you."

Meek started to walk away.

"Goodbye, Stiffy," he called.

"So long," Stiffy shouted.

Meek hesitated. It seemed there should have been more he could have said. Some way to let Stiffy know he liked him. Some way to tell him he was a friend in a life which had known few friends.

He tried to think of ways to put what he felt in words, but there wasn't any way, none that didn't sound awkward and sentimental.

He wheeled about, headed for the space port. His feet went faster and faster, until finally he was running.

He had to get out of here, he told himself, before he got into another jam. His luck was stretched too thin already. A fellow just couldn't go on having luck like that.

And besides, there was all of space to roam in, other places to see. That was what he had set out to do. To see the Solar System in his own ship, to do all the things he'd dreamed about back in the cubby hole at Lunar Exports, Inc.

And he was going to do just that, he promised himself. Although he hoped the next stop would be more peaceable.

Oliver Meek sighed happily—*this was the life.*

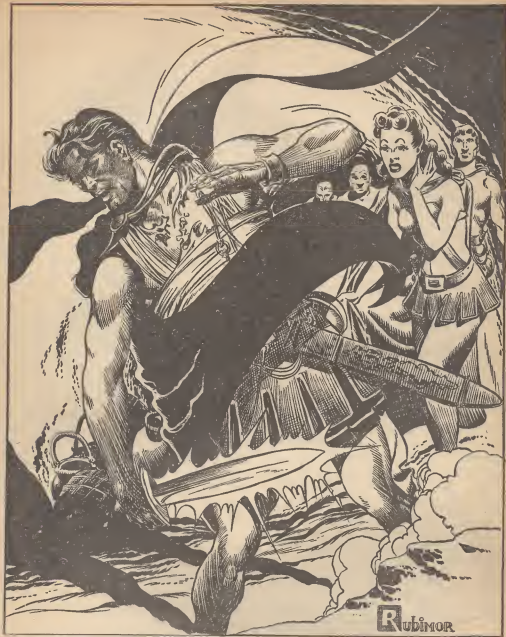


Warrior of Two Worlds

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

He was the man of two planets, drawn through the blackness of space to save a nation from ruthless invaders. He was Yandro, the Stranger of the Prophecy—and he found that he was destined to fight both sides.

Illustration by RUBIMOR



And then I, Yandro, was upon the officer.

MY SENSES came to me slowly and somehow shyly, as if not sure of their way or welcome. I felt first—pressure on my brow and chest, as if I lay face downward; then the tug and buffet of a strong, probing wind, insistent but not cold, upon my naked skin. Closing my hands, I felt them dig into coarse dirt. I turned my face downwind and opened my eyes. There was little to see, so thick was the dust cloud around me. Words formed themselves on my thick tongue, words that

must have been spoken by so many reviving unfortunates through the ages:

"Where am I?"

And at once there was an answer:

"You lie upon the world Dondromogon."

I knew the language of that answer, but where it came from—above, beneath, or indeed within me—I could not say. I lifted a hand, and knuckled dust from my eyes.

"How did I get here?" I demanded of the speaker.

"It was ordered—by the Masters of the Worlds—that you should be brought from your own home planet, called Earth in the System of the star called Sun. Do you remember Earth?"

And I did not know whether I remembered or not. Vague matters stirred deep in me, but I could not for certain say they were memories. I asked yet again:

"Who am I?"

The voice had a note of triumph. "You do not know that. It is as well, for this will be a birth and beginning of your destined leadership on Dondromogon."

"Destined—leadership—" I began to repeat, and fell silent. I had need to think. The voice was telling me that I had been snatched from worlds away, for a specified purpose here on whatever windswept planet Dondromogon might be. "Birth and beginning—destined leadership—" Fantastic! And yet, for all I could say to the contrary, unvarnishedly true.

"Dondromogon?" I mumbled. "The name is strange to me."

"It is a world the size of your native one," came words of information. "Around a star it spins, light-years away from the world of your birth. One face of Dondromogon ever looks to the light and heat, wherefore its metals run in glowing seas. The other face is ever away in cold darkness, with its air freezing into solid chunks. But because Dondromogon wavers on its axis, there are two lunes of its surface which from time to time shift from night to day. These are habitable."

My eyes were tight shut against the dust, but they saw in imagination such a planet—one-half incandescent, one-half pitchy black. From pole to pole on opposite sides ran the two twilight zones, widest at the equators like the outer rind of two slices of melon. Of course, such areas, between the hot and cold hemispheres, would be buffeted by mighty gales . . . the voice was to be heard again:

"War is fought between the two strips of habitable ground. War, unceasing, bitter, with no quarter asked, given or expected. Dondromogon was found and settled long ago, by adventurers from afar. Now come invaders, to reap the benefits of discovery and toil." A pause. "You find that thought unpleasant? You wish to right that wrong?"

"Anyone would wish that," I replied. "But how—"

"You are going to ask how you were brought here. That is the mystery of the *Masters*." The voice became grand. "Suffice it that you were needed, and that the time was ripe. There is a proper time, like a proper place, for each thing and each happening. Now, go to your destiny."

I rose on my knees, shielding my face from the buffeting wind by lifting a forearm. Somewhere through the murky clouds showed a dim blocky silhouette, a building of sorts.

The voice spoke no more. I had not the time to wonder about it. I got to my feet, bent double to keep from being blown over, and staggered toward the promised haven.

I reached it, groped along until I found a door. There was no latch, handle or entry button, and I pounded heavily on the massive panels. The door opened from within, and I was blown inside, to fall sprawling.

I STRUCK my forehead upon a floor of stone or concrete, and so was half-stunned, but still I could distinguish something like the sound of agitated voices. Then I felt myself grasped, by both shoulders, and drawn roughly erect. The touch restored my senses, and I wrenched myself violently free.

What had seized me? That was my first wonder. On this strange world called Dondromogon, what manner of intelligent life bade defiance to heat and cold and storm, and built these stout structures, and now laid hands—were they hands indeed?—upon me? I swung around, setting my back to a solid wall.

My first glance showed me that my companions were creatures like myself—two-legged, fair-skinned men, shorter and slighter than I, but clad in metal-faced garments and wearing weapons in their girdles. I saw that each bore a swordlike device with a curved guard, set in a narrow sheath as long as my arm. Each also had a shorter weapon, with a curved stock to fit the palm of the hand, borne snugly in a holster. With such arms I had a faint sense of familiarity.

"Who are you, and where are you from?" said one of the two, a broad-faced middle-

aged fellow. "Don't lie any more than you can help."

I felt a stirring of the hair on my neck, but kept my voice mild and level: "Why should I lie? Especially as I don't know who I am, or where I'm from, or anything that has happened longer ago than just a moment. I woke up out there in the dust storm, and I managed to come here for shelter."

"He's a Newcomer spy," quoth the other. "Let's put him under arrest."

"And leave this gate unguarded?" demanded the other. "Sound the signal," and he jerked his head toward a system of levers and gauges on the wall beside the door-jamb.

"There's a bigger reward for capture than for warning," objected his friend in turn, "and whoever comes to take this man will claim 'capture.' I'll guard here, and you take him in, then we'll divide—"

"No. Yours is the idea. I'll guard and you take him in." The second man studied me apprehensively. "He's big, and looks strong, even without weapons."

"Don't be afraid," I urged. "I'll make no resistance, if you'll only conduct me to your commander. I can show him that I'm no spy or enemy."

Both stared narrowly. "No spy? No enemy?" asked the broad-faced one who had first spoken. Then, to his comrade: "No reward, then."

"I think there'll be a reward," was the rejoinder, and the second man's hand stole to the sword-weapon. With a whispering rasp it cleared from its scabbard. "If he's dead, we get pay for both warning and capture—"

His thumb touched a button at theommel of the hilt. The dull blade suddenly glowed like heated iron, and from it crackled and pulsed little rainbow rays.

There was no time to think or plan or ponder. I moved in, with a knowing speed that surprised me as much as the two guards. Catching the fellow's weapon wrist, I clamped it firmly and bent it back and around. He whimpered and swore, and his glowing sword dropped. Its radiant blade almost fell on my naked foot. Before the clang of its fall was through echoing, I had caught it up, and set the point within inches of its owner's unprotected face.

"Quiet, or I'll roast you," I told him.

The other had drawn a weapon of his own, a pistol-form arrangement. I turned on him, but too late. He pressed the trigger, and from the muzzle came—not a projectile but a flying, spouting filament of cord that seemed to spring on me like a long thin snake and to fasten coil after coil around my body. The stuff that gushed from the gun-muzzle seemed plastic in form, but hardened so quickly upon contact with the air, it bound me like wire. Half a dozen adroit motions of the fellow's gun hand, and my arms were caught to my body. I dropped my sword to prevent it burning me, and tried to break away, but my bonds were too much for me.

"Let me out of this," I growled, and kicked at the man with my still unbound foot. He snapped a half-hitch on my ankle, and threw me heavily. Triumphant laughter came from both adversaries. Then:

"What's this?"

THE challenge was clear, rich, authoritative. Someone else had come, from a rearward door into the stone-walled vestibule where the encounter was taking place.

A woman this time, not of great height, and robust but not heavy. She was dressed for vigorous action in dark slacks with buskins to make them snug around ankles and calves, a jerkin of stout material that was faced with metal armor plates and left bare her round, strong arms. A gold-worked fillet bound her tawny hair back from a rosy, bold-featured face—a nose that was positively regal, a mouth short and firm but not hard, and blue eyes that just now burned and questioned. She wore a holstered pistol, and a cross-belt supported several instruments of a kind I could not remember seeing before. A crimson cloak gave color and dignity to her costume, and plainly she was someone of position, for both the men stiffened to attention.

"A spy," one ventured. "He pushed in, claimed he was no enemy, then tried to attack—"

"They lie," I broke in, very conscious of my naked helplessness before her regard. "They wanted to kill me and be rewarded for a false story of vigilance. I only defended myself."

"Get him on his feet," the young woman

said, and the two guards obeyed. Then her eyes studied me again. "Gods! What a mountain of a man!" she exclaimed. "Can you walk, stranger?"

"Barely, with these bonds."

"Then manage to do so." She flung off her cloak and draped it over my nakedness. "Walk along beside me. No tricks, and I promise you fair hearing."

We went through the door by which she had entered, into a corridor beyond. It was lighted by small, brilliant bulbs at regular intervals. Beyond, it gave into several passages. She chose one of them and conducted me along. "You are surely not of us," she commented. "Men I have seen who are heavier than you, but none taller. Whence came you?"

I remembered the strange voice that had instructed me. "I am from a far world," I replied. "It is called—yes, Earth. Beyond that, I know nothing. Memory left me."

"The story is a strange one," she commented. "And your name?"

"I do not know that, either. Who are you?"

"Doriza—a gentlewoman of the guard. My inspection tour brought me by chance to where you fought my outposts. But it is not for you to ask questions. Enter here."

We passed through another room, and I found myself in an office. A man in richly-embossed armor platings sat there. He had a fringe of pale beard, and his eyes were bluer than the gentlewoman Doriza's.

She made a gesture of salute, hand at shoulder height, and reported the matter. He nodded for her to fall back to a corner.

"Stranger," he said to me, "can you think of no better tale to tell than you now offer?"

"I tell the truth," was my reply, not very graciously.

"You will have to prove that," he admonished me.

"What proof have I?" I demanded. "On this world of yours—Dondromogon, isn't it called?—I'm no more than an hour old. Accident or shock has taken my memory. Let me have a medical examination. A scientist probably can tell what happened to put me in such a condition."

"I am a scientist," offered Doriza, and came forward. Her eyes met mine, sud-

denly flickered and lowered. "His gaze," she muttered.

The officer at the table was touching a button. An attendant appeared, received an order, and vanished again. In a few moments two other men came—one a heavily armed officer of rank, the other an elderly, bearded fellow in a voluminous robe that enfolded him in most dignified manner.

This latter man opened wide his clear old eyes at sight of me.

"The stranger of the prophecy!" he cried, in a voice that made us all jump.

THE OFFICER rose from behind the table. "Are you totally mad, Sporr? You mystic doctors are too apt to become fuddled—"

"But it is, it is!" The graybeard flourished a thin hand at me. "Look at him, you of little faith! Your mind dwells so much on material strength that you lose touch with the spiritual—"

He broke off, and wheeled on the attendant who had led him in. "To my study," he commanded. "On the shelf behind my desk, bring the great gold-bound book that is third from the right." Then he turned back, and bowed toward me. "Surely you are Yandro, the Conquering Stranger," he said, intoning as if in formal prayer. "Pardon these short-sighted ones—deign to save us from our enemies—"

The girl Doriza spoke to the officer: "If Sporr speaks truth, and he generally does, you have committed a blasphemy."

The other made a little grimace. "This may be Yandro, though I'm a plain soldier and follow the classics very little. The First Comers are souls to worship, not to study. If indeed he is Yandro," and he was most respectful, "he will appreciate, like a good military mind, my caution against possible impostors."

"Who might Yandro be?" I demanded, very uncomfortable in my bonds and loose draperies.

Old Sporr almost crowed. "You see? If he was a true imposter, he would come equipped with all plausible knowledge. As it is—"

"As it is, he may remember that the Conquering Stranger is foretold to come with no memory of anything," supplied the officer. "Score one against you, Sporr. You

should have been able to instruct me, not I you."

The attendant reentered, with a big book in his hands. It looked old and well-thumbed, with dim gold traceries on its binding. Sporr snatched it, and turned to a brightly colored picture. He looked once, his beard gaped, and he dropped to his knees.

"Happy, happy the day," he jabbered, "that I was spared to see our great champion come among us in the flesh, as was foretold of ancient time by the First Comers!"

Doriza and the officer crossed to his side, snatching the book. Their bright heads bent above it. Doriza was first to speak. "It is very like," she half-stammered.

The officer faced me, with a sort of baffled respect.

"I still say you will understand my caution," he addressed me, with real respect and shyness this time. "If you are Yandro himself, you can prove it. The prophecy even sketches a thumb-print—" And he held the book toward me.

It contained a full-page likeness, in color, of myself wrapped in a scarlet robe. Under this was considerable printed description, and to one side a thumb-print, or a drawing of one, in black.

"Behold," Doriza was saying, "matters which even expert identification men take into thought. The ears in the picture are like the ears of the real man—"

"That could be plastic surgery," rejoined the officer. "Such things are artfully done by the Newcomers, and the red mantle he wears more easily assumed."

Doriza shook her head. "That happens to be my cloak. I gave it to him because he was naked, and not for any treasonable masquerade. But the thumbprint—"

"Oh, yes, the thumb-print," I repeated wearily. "By all means, study my thumbs, if you'll first take these bonds off of me."

"Bonds," mumbled old Sporr. He got creakily up from his knees and hustled to me. From under his robe he produced a pouch, and took out a pencil-sized rod. Gingerly opening the red mantle, he touched my tether in several places with the glowing end of the rod. The coils dropped away from my grateful body and limbs. I thrust out my hands.

"Thumb-prints?" I offered.

Sporr had produced something else, a little vial of dark pigment. He carefully anointed one of my thumbs, and pressed it to the page. All three gazed.

"The same," said Doriza.

And they were all on their knees before me.

"Forgive me, great Yandro," said the officer thickly. "I did not know."

"Get up," I bade them. "I want to hear why I was first bound, and now worshipped."

II

THEY ROSE, but stood off respectfully. The officer spoke first. "I am Rohbar, field commander of this defense position," he said with crisp respect. "Sporr is a mystic doctor, full of godly wisdom. Doriza, a junior officer and chief of the guard. And you—how could you know?—are sent by the First Comers to save us from our enemies."

"Enemies?" I repeated.

"The Newcomers," supplemented Doriza. "They have taken the 'Other Side' of Dondromogon, and would take our side as well. We defend ourselves at the poles. Now," and her voice rang joyously, "you will lead us to defeat and crush them utterly!"

"Not naked like this," I said, and laughed. I must have sounded foolish, but it had its effect.

"Follow me, deign to follow me," Sporr said. "Your clothing, your quarters, your destiny, all await you."

We went out by the door at the rear, and Sporr respectfully gestured me upon a metal-plated platform. Standing beside me, he tinkered with a lever. We dropped smoothly away into a dark corridor, past level after level of light and sound.

"Our cities are below ground," he quavered. "Whipped by winds above, we must scabble in the depths for life's necessities—chemicals to transmute into food, to weave into clothing, to weld into tools and weapons—"

The mention of food brought to me the thought that I was hungry. I said as much, even as our elevator platform came to the lowest level and stopped.

"I have arranged for that," Sporr be-

gan, then fell silent, fingers combing his beard in embarrassment.

"Arranged food for me?" I prompted sharply. "As if you know I had come? What—"

"Pardon, great Yandro," babbled Sporr. "I was saying that I arranged food, as always, for whatever guest should come. Please follow."

We entered a new small chamber, where a table was set with dishes of porcelain-like plastic. Sporr held a chair for me, and waited on me with the utmost gingerly respect. The food was a pungent and filling jelly, a little bundle of transparent leaves or scraps like cellophane and tasting of spice, and a tumbler of pink juice. I felt refreshed and satisfied, and thanked Sporr, who led me on to the next room.

"Behold!" he said, with a dramatic gesture. "Your garments, even as they have been preserved against your coming!"

It was a sleeping chamber, with a cot made fast to the wall, a metal locker or cupboard, with a glass door through which showed the garments of which Sporr spoke.

The door closed softly behind me—I was left alone.

Knowing that it was expected of me, I went to the locker and opened the door. The garments inside were old, I could see, but well kept and serviceable. I studied their type, and my hands, if not my mind, seemed familiar with them.

There was a kiltlike item, belted at the waist and falling to mid-thigh. A resilient band at the top, with a series of belt-holes, made it adaptable to my own body or to any other. Then came an upper garment, a long strip of soft, close-woven fabric that spiraled around the torso from hip to armpit, the end looping over the left shoulder and giving full play to the arms. A gold-worked fillet bound the brows and swept back my longish hair, knotting at the nape of the neck. The only fitted articles were a pair of shoes, metal-soled and soft-uppered, that went on well enough and ran cross-garters up to below the knee, like buskins. The case also held a platinum chain for the neck, a belt-bag, and a handsome sword, with clips to fasten them in place. These things, too, I donned, and closed the glass door.

THE LIGHT struck it at such an angle as to make it serve for a full-length mirror. With some curiosity I gazed at my image.

The close-fitting costume was rich and dark, with bright colors only for edgings and minor accessories. I myself—and it was as if I saw my body for the first time—towered rather bluffly, with great breadth of chest and shoulder, and legs robust enough to carry such bulk. The face was square but haggard, as if from some toil or pain which was now wiped from my recollection. That nose had been even bigger than it was now, but a fracture had shortened it somewhat. The eyes were deep set and dark and moody—small wonder!—the chin heavy, the mouth made grim by a scar at one corner. Black, shaggy hair hung down like brackets. All told, I looked like a proper person for physical labor, or even fierce fighting—but surely no inspirational leader or savior of a distressed people.

I took the military cloak which Doriza had lent me and slung it over my shoulders. Turning, I clanked out on my metal-soled shoes.

Sporr was waiting in the room where I had eaten. His eyes widened at sight of me, something like a grin of triumph flashed through his beard. Then he bowed, supple and humble, his palms together.

"It is indeed Yandro, our great chief," he mumbled. Then he turned and crossed the room. A sort of mouthpiece sprouted from the wall.

"I announce," he intoned into it. "I announce, I, Sporr, the reader and foreteller of wisdom. Yandro is with us, he awaits his partners and friends. Let them meet him in the audience hall."

Facing me again, he motioned most respectfully toward the door to the hall. I moved to open it, and he followed, muttering.

Outside stood Doriza. Her blue eyes met mine, and her lips moved to frame a word. Then, suddenly, she was on her knee, catching my hand and kissing it.

"I serve Yandro," she vowed tremulously. "Now and forever—and happy that I was fated to live when he returned for the rescue of all Dondromogon."

"Please get up," I bade her, trying not to sound as embarrassed as I felt. "Come

with me. There is still much that I do not understand."

"I am Yandro's orderly and helper," she said. Rising, she ranged herself at my left hand. "Will Yandro come this way? He will be awaited in the audience hall."

It seemed to me then that the corridors were vast and mixed as a labyrinth, but Doriza guided me without the slightest hesitation past one tangled crossway after another. My questions she answered with a mixture of awe and brightness.

"It is necessary that we live like this," she explained. "The hot air of Dondromogon's sunlit face is ever rising, and the cold air from the dark side comes rushing under to fill the vacuum. Naturally, our strip of twilight country is never free of winds too high and fierce to fight. No crops can grow outside, no domestic animals flourish. We must pen ourselves away from the sky and soil, with stout walls and heavy sunken parapets. Our deep mines afford every element for necessities of life."

I LOOKED at my garments, and hers. There were various kinds of fabric, which I now saw plainly to be synthetic. "The other side, where those you call the Newcomers dwell and fight," I reminded. "Is it also windswept? Why can two people not join forces and face toil and nature together? They should fight, not each other, but the elements."

Doriza had no answer that time, but Sporr spoke up behind us: "Great Yandro is wise as well as powerful. But the Newcomers do not want to help, not even to conquer. They want to obliterate us. There is nothing to do—not for lifetimes—but to fight them back at the two poles."

We came to a main corridor. It had a line of armed guards, but no pedestrians or vehicles, though I thought I caught a murmur of far-off traffic. Doriza paused before a great portal, closed by a curtainlike sheet of dull metal. She spoke into a mouthpiece:

"Doriza, gentlewoman of the guard, conducts Yandro, the Conquering Stranger, to greet his lieutenants!"

I have said that the portal was closed by a curtainlike metal sheet; and like a curtain it lifted, letting us through into the auditorium.

6—Planet—Summer.

That spacious chamber had rows of benches, with galleries above, that might have seated a thousand. However, only a dozen or so were present, on metal chairs ranged across the stage upon which we entered. They were all men but two, and wore robes of black, plum-purple or red. At sight of me, they rose together, most respectfully. They looked at me, and I looked at them.

My first thought was, that if these were people of authority and trust in the nation I seemed destined to save, my work was cut out for me.

Not that they really seemed stupid—none had the look, or the subsequent action, of stupidity. But they were not pleasant. Their dozen pairs of eyes fixed me with some steadiness, but with no frankness anywhere. One man had a round, greedy-seeming face. Another was too narrow and cunning to look it. Of the women, one was nearly as tall as I and nobly proportioned, with hair of a red that would be inspiring were it not so blatantly dyed. The other was a little wisp of a brunette, with teeth too big for her scarlet mouth and bright eyes like some sort of a rodent. They all wore jewelry. Too much jewelry.

My mind flew back to the two scrubby, venial guardsmen who had first welcomed me; to stuffy Rohbar, the commander; to Sporr, spry and clever enough, but somehow unwholesome; Doriza—no, she was not like these others, who may have lived too long in their earth-buried shelters. And Doriza now spoke to the gathering:

"Yandro, folk of the Council! He deigns to give you audience."

"Yandro!"

They all spoke the name in chorus, and bowed toward me.

Silence then, a silence which evidently I must break. I broke it: "Friends, I am among you with no more memory or knowledge than an infant. I hear wonderful things, of which I seem to be the center. Are they true?"

"The tenth part of the wonders which concern mighty Yandro have not been told," intoned Sporr, ducking his bearded head in a bow, but fixing me with his wise old eyes.

One of the group, called Council by Doriza, now moved a pace forward. He was the greedy-faced man, short but plump,

and very conscious of the dignified folds of his purple robe. One carefully-tended hand brushed back his ginger-brown hair, then toyed with a little moustache.

"I am Gederr, senior of this Council," he purred. "If Yandro permits, I will speak simply. Our hopes have been raised by Yandro's return—the return presaged of old by those who could see the future, and more recently by the death in battle of the Newcomer champion, called Barak."

"Barak!" I repeated. "I—I—" And I paused. When I had to learn my own name, how could it be that I sensed memory of another's name?

"Barak was a brute—mighty, but a brute." Thus Gederr continued. "Weapons in his hands were the instruments of fate. His hands alone caused fear and ruin. But it pleased our fortune-bringing stars to encompass his destruction." He grinned, and licked his full lips. "Now, even as they are without their battle-leader, so we have ours."

"You honor me," I told him. "Yet I still know little. It seems that I am expected to aid and lead and save the people of this world called Dondromogon. But I must know them before I can help."

Gederr turned his eyes upon the woman with the red hair, and gestured to her "Tell him, Elonie." Then he faced me. "Have we Yandro's permission to sit?"

"By all means," I granted, a little impatiently, and sat down myself. The others followed suit—the Council on their range of chairs, Doriza on a bench near me, Sporr somewhere behind. The woman called Elonie remained upon her sandalled feet, great eyes the color of deep green water fixed upon me.

ELONIE was taller than any of her fellow Council members, taller than Sporr, almost as tall as I. Her figure was mature, generous, but fine, and set off by a snugly-draped robe as red as her dyed cascade of hair. Red-dyed, too, were the tips of her fingers, and her lips were made vivid and curvy beyond nature by artificial crimson. She made a bow toward me, smiled a little, showing most perfect white teeth. She began:

"Dondromogon began with the First Comers. Many ages they ruled here, the Fifteen of them. Forever they were fif-

teen, for when one died, another was bred; when one was born, the oldest or least useful was eliminated. It was they who planned and began this shelter-city, found the elements that support life and give comfort.

"Others came, from far worlds. The Fifteen changed their policy of a fixed number, and became rulers of the new colonists. But after some study, it was decided to set a new limit. Seven hundred was decided upon, and seven hundred we still remain."

"Wait," I interrupted. "You mean that, when new children are born among you, someone must die?"

She nodded. "Exactly as with the Fifteen. We eliminate the least useful. Sometimes we eliminate the child itself. More often, an older and worn-out individual."

I thought that I sensed an uncomfortable wriggle in Sporr, behind me. "Why is this?" I demanded.

"Because, Yandro, there cannot be room and supplies enough for a greater number."

I scowled to myself. So far I had seen luxury enough in Dondromogon's chambers and tunnels. But there remained so much to learn. "Go on," I bade her.

She nodded again, and obeyed: "Thus we on Dondromogon live and have lived. This world is ours, its good and evil. But," and her voice, from a soft, shy murmur, turned hard, "there are those who do not wish it so. The Newcomers—the invaders!"

"Ill be their fate," growled Gederr beside her, as if rehearsed.

"They came to us, not long ago in years . . . but I forget, Yandro does not know as yet the length of Dondromogon's year, or Dondromogon's day. They came, then, no longer ago than the time needed for a baby to become a child."

Three years of my own reckoning I decided, and wished she had not mentioned babies and children. I still disliked that arbitrary survival-of-the-fittest custom. "Where did they come from?" I asked.

"Who can tell? Perhaps from the forgotten world where came our ancestors. Somehow they had learned of our conquest here, our advances and wealth-gathering in spite of natural obstacles. That is what they hope to plunder from us, these conquering Newcomers!"



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And when you sit down to write, tell *him* why you didn't buy your share of War Bonds last pay day—if you didn't.

"Dear Joe," you might say, "the old topcoat was getting kind of threadbare, so I . . ."

No, cross it out. Joe might not understand about the topcoat, especially if

he's shivering in a damp Japanese cell.

Let's try again. "Dear Joe, I've been working pretty hard and haven't had a vacation in over a year, so . . ."

Better cross that out, too. They don't ever get vacations where Joe's staying.

Well, what are you waiting for? Go ahead, write the letter to Joe. Try to write it, anyhow.

But if somehow you find you can't, will you do this? Will you up the amount you're putting into your Payroll Savings Plan—so that you'll be buying your share of War Bonds from here on in?

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"Ill be their fate," repeated Gederr, and two or three of the Council with him.

"But the winds are too high for a final battle to happen quickly. After some fighting, they seized upon the other strip of habitable land, on Dondromogon's other side. We fight them at the two poles—mostly underground. Do you understand?"

"I seem to," I replied. "But now what about me? The story of Yandro?"

"Did not Sporr tell everything?" broke in Gederr. "He should have done so. Sporr, the Council is not pleased."

"I had to go slowly," apologized the old man, and Elonie took up the tale:

"It is known to all on Dondromogon. The days of the First Comers held great minds that could see the future. Then it was foreseen that, in Dondromogon's hour of peril and need, a time set by the desecration of an enemy great and mighty—"

"Barak," I said aloud, still puzzling over that strangely familiar name.

"At that time," finished Elonie, "a leader to be called Yandro, the Conquering Stranger, would come. Even clothing was supplied—clothing not like that we wear today."

SHE gestured toward me. Indeed, the garments I wore were different from those of my companions. I shook my head slowly, and tried to digest what I had heard once again. But one bit of it still clamored for rejection.

"About these eliminations," I harked back. "Who decides on which person must die to keep the number down to seven hundred?"

"We do," replied Gederr, almost bleakly.

"And the Newcomers, have they a similar custom?"

"Not they, the greedy interlopers." Gederr looked very greedy himself. "They delve and destroy in Dondromogon, feeding ever new spates of arrivals."

"It seems," I offered, "that you would be well advised to grow in number, and so win this war."

But Gederr shook his head. "We checkmate them at the two poles, where the way into our territory is narrow. And more than seven hundred would be hard to make comfortable."

"Friends, I do not like it," I stated flatly.

"There seems to be ruthlessness, and waste."

"Why waste?" spoke up another of the Council, the narrow man, whose name was Stribakar. "This war has begun only recently, but it will last forever. At least, so I see it."

"Now that Yandro is here, it shall be brought to an end," pronounced Elonie, her green eyes fixed on me. "Will it please Yandro to see something of this war?"

"Since you make it so much my business, I would be pleased indeed," I told her, and Sporr rose from his seat. He went to an oblong of white translucency, on a side wall of the stage within sight of us all. It was about twice a man's height by thrice a man's width.

"The screen of a televiso," he said to me, and touched a dial beside it. The screen lighted, with confused blurrings of color and movement. He dialed quickly and knowingly.

"We see an underground passage," he said, "And those who dispute therein."

I could see a gloomy stretch of earth-walled passage, lighted from somewhere by a yellow radiance that became dim and brown toward one end. I had no way of judging the true size of the object whose image I saw, until I made out stealthy movement at the darker end. Sporr's dialing made parts of the scene clear, and the movement proved to be that of a human figure, prone and partially concealed in a depression of the floor. That figure was no more than half-height, by which I estimated the passage itself to be some fifteen or eighteen feet to the top of its rough-dug ceiling.

"A scout," breathed Doriza beside me, pointing to the prone man. "See, Yandro, he wears earth-colored cloth over his armor, and his arms and face are smeared with mud. The thing he holds is a ray-digger, whereby he burrows his way forward to the enemy."

"Enemy in the same tunnel with him?" I asked:

"Right." I saw her blond head dip. "Our tunnel broke into one of theirs, by accident or plan. At point of contact, both forces are cautious, fearing ambush. Now—"

She said no more. The scout on the screen was apparently creeping forward

through the solid soil of the floor, only the top of his head and shoulders showing. Once or twice I saw the object he employed, a baton-like tool of black metal with a bulb or ball at one end. It emitted faint sparks and shudders of light, which melted or vaporized the earth ahead of him.

"See! He senses danger near."

Indeed he did; for he paused, and took something else from his belt—a disk the size of his palm. This he held close to his face, studying it.

"Televiso," explained Doriza. "It has limited power of identifying both sound and sight near at hand. The scout knows that enemy approach."

STILL working his dials, Sporr made the scene slide along. The bright end of the tunnel came into view for some yards. All who watched leaned forward excitedly.

"Newcomers," breathed Gederr, and added his familiar curse, "ill be their fate! They have one of those vibration-shields."

"Warn the advance party," bade Stribakar, and Sporr, turning from his dials, muttered quickly into a speaking tube.

The situation that thus interested and activated my companions was hard to make out. I saw only an indistinct fuzziness in a sort of niche against the tunnel wall. Doriza pointed.

"A vibration-shield," she told me. "The Newcomers have such things. Some machine or other power stirs the molecules of air to such a new tempo as to create a plane of force. No missile, no light even, can penetrate. They are sheltered and all but indistinguishable. See, they go forward."

The eddying cloud moved along the tunnel. We could see the scout again. He tucked away his disk and employed the ray-digger. Quickly he sank deeper and out of sight.

"Burrowing in," pronounced Gederr. "If he succeeds in what he hopes—"

"Spare him, you mean?" asked Stribakar, and Gederr nodded.

The eddying blotch that marked the power-shield of the invaders came closer. I saw it approach the place where the scout had burrowed away. It paused there, as if those hidden by it were investigating. Then—

"Brave fellow!" cried Elonie, like someone at an exciting sports event or play.

The scout had dug himself a little channel beneath the floor. Now he burst into view, beyond and behind the invaders. He held a pistol-weapon in each hand. One spat sparks—some sort of pellets or projectiles. The other was plainly a web-spinner like the one that first had bound me, and this he poised ready for use.

His projectiles seemed to find an opening behind the power-shield. A human form lurched into view—a glowing, writhing form, like a man of red-hot metal. An agonized leap, a shudder, and the body fell, abruptly falling into clinkered bits. A moment later, the power-shield disturbance vanished, and there stood revealed two others, clad like the scout in earth-colored jumper over armor.

"He got the power-shield man!" exulted Elonie. She was on her feet, applauding wildly. In the same second, I saw the scout point and discharge his spinner-gun. Whirling coils of cord struck, wound and tangled the two foremen. The scout's bearded mouth opened, as if he yelled in exultation.

But that was his last cry and action. Another eddy, larger and swifter, suddenly came into the picture behind him. From it sprang a pale shaft of light. The scout went down on his face as if in sudden prayer. He moved no more.

Toward the dark end, Dondromogon figures seemed to move. There was a great spatter of spark-pellets. But the eddy of the new power-shield had scurried forward, enveloping and vanishing the two bound men. It retired as quickly. No movement, no figure, except those of the dead scout and the charred remains of the man he had killed.

"There will be little action here for some time to come," announced Gederr. "Switch it off, Sporr."

Sporr did so. I shook myself, as if to rid my body of unpleasant dampness and chill.

"Exciting," I said. "Unusual. I suppose this goes on all the time."

"Not all the time," Elonie demurred. "As Yandro has heard, the battle-areas are limited, in the region of the poles. There is much maneuvering, but not too much contact. This incident was an order."

"Order?" I repeated.

"We sent the man you saw, knowing that you would want this televiso view of how we made war."

I snorted and faced her angrily. "You sent him to his death? So that I could see a show? You value life very cheaply, Elonie."

III

SHE SMILED, as if I had complimented her. "Oh, the man was up for elimination. He was supernumerary. Of course, if he had succeeded in his capture of prisoners and one of the devices that make those power-shields—"

I remembered what Stribakar had said to Gederr. "He was brave," I said, "and it was a shame that he had to die. You want me to be a leader in war like that? I have other ideas of warfare."

All of them looked at me, and one spoke from behind Gederr: "We had hoped that Yandro would say that. Yandro means to lead us in person—in a great and decisive battle."

"At least it would be cleaner than this mole-digging and sneaking," I said hotly.

Gederr rose. "Sporr, tune in whatever terminal you can find among the Newcomers. I shall say something to them."

Obediently Sporr manipulated levers, push-buttons and dials near the speaking-tube. Gederr crossed to it and spoke harshly:

"Newcomers, ill be your fate! Your defeat is at hand! We give you warning! Our engines will burrow a mighty cave near the north pole. Let you come there, with all your hosts—and so shall we, so shall we!" His voice rose to a scream. "With us—leading us—comes the greatest fighter that Dondromogon has ever known, and the sight of him shall *break your hearts!*"

My ears rang, as the ears of all listeners must have rung, with those last words. Gederr turned away, and Sporr dialed the power off.

"Now," Gederr said, "is there not some plan for amusement? A pleasant hour in the Pavilion? Great Yandro's heart is troubled—for it is as great as himself—by thoughts of war and its pains. Let him come with us for solace."

"Amen to that," said Elonie, and she walked toward me. I rose, and she slid her bare arm through mine. Her face was close to mine, smiling and full of invitation. It seemed that Doriza was going to say something, but Elonie spoke first: "He will need no military aide, Doriza. Nothing military about the Pavilion, you remember."

We walked out together—Elonie and myself, then the others. We found a wider corridor, and one full of hum and motion. The smooth floor of the passage was seamed with metal-shod grooves, in which moved vehicles—ovoid vehicles, of various sizes, balancing, it seemed, on one whirling wheel apiece. Elonie escorted me to one such car, which stood poised on its wheel like a dancer on tiptoe. There was room inside for the two of us only, among luxurious cushions. At her respectful invitation I sat inside, and she operated controls.

"Thus we travel in this city," she chatted as we rolled along. "Not swiftly, of course, in this nor in our other city, near the South Pole. The real speed is in the way-tunnels between."

"Way-tunnels the width of a world?" I asked, wondering. "How can only seven hundred persons do such work?"

"You saw the ray-digger on the televiso. There are larger and more complex diggers of that type, by which we can journey almost anywhere underground—clear through the core of Dondromogon and up into Newcomer lands, were it not for the inner fires. Perhaps we shall dig them out by the roots in time, despite their defenses."

Once again I thought of so much science and wealth, and of people dying because their rulers thought seven hundred were none too few to enjoy the benefits of a world.

We stopped down a fork of the vehicle-corridor, and Elonie dismounted before another of the metal curtain-doors. At her touch of a button and a word into a speaking tube, it opened to us. We passed into a smaller passageway, and then out into a place of aching beauty.

My first impression was of pastel lights, changing and mingling constantly—blue, violet, pink, green, orchid, pale.

They struck from starlike points in a great domed ceiling, over a floor like a mirror. And the pastel-tinted air was filled with music, soft but penetrating and heady. There was a breeze from somewhere, scented and warm. In and out of other doorways across the floor wandered figures, male and female, murmuring together and helping themselves to cups from great trestles and tables.

"The refreshments are provided," Elonie told me softly. "We need not wait for the others. Come, Yandro. They have poured wine—Yandro knows what wine is? And we have music, perfume, light, laughter, and for companions all of Dondromogon."

"All?" I repeated.

"All save those on guard or garrison duty. Come, mighty one. Know happiness that is worth fighting and conquering to keep."

She tugged at my arm, urging me toward the wine-tables.

And now there was a louder murmur, excitement and even apprehension, at my entrance. I suppose I was an extraordinary figure—taller than any person there, indeed none were anywhere near my height save the nobly proportioned Elonie herself. And I was more sinewy, and darker, as if of another race entirely. Timid memories struggled somewhere within me, as if knocking at the closed doors of my consciousness. Somewhere, somehow in the past, things had happened that might explain so much, make my present position clearer to me.

Gederr was following close behind, muttering something to Doriza. Then he pressed on beyond me, and mounted a sort of dais or platform.

"You of Dondromogon!" he called, and such was his voice, or perhaps the acoustic properties of that hemispheric room, that all could hear him easily. "Have you not heard rumors of a great happening? The ancient legend of a mighty leader to come among us—"

"Yandro!" cried a deep-voiced fellow in the front belt of listeners. His eyes were on me, studying, questioning.

"Yes, Yandro, champion of our cause, sent by the First Comers themselves!" That was Elonie, and with a hand on my elbow she urged me up on the platform beside Gederr.

Applause burst out, some of it a little drunken, but quite hearty and honest. "Yandro!" cried the deep-voiced man again, and others took it up: "Yandro! Yandro!" Whatever my own doubts, they had none.

Gederr held up an authoritative hand for silence. "He came from far in space and time, and one look will assure you of his leadership. The time for deliverance is at hand, men and women of Dondromogon! We trust in mighty Yandro!"

There was louder applause, in the midst of which Gederr sidled close. "Speak to them," he mumbled in my ear.

Like him, I lifted a hand for silence. It came, and I eyed my audience, as I sought for words to speak.

THE FIRST thought that came was that, if Elonie were right and these people were the selected best of the race, then Dondromogon was decadently peopled. Not only were they smallish and mostly frail, but few had a distinguished or aggressive cast of countenance. The Council members had been wise-seeming, perhaps, but even they had not struck me as healthy types. To one side stood Doriza, militarily at attention, blue eyes fast upon me—she was a notable exception, compact and strong and healthy of body and mind, and at the same time quite as feminine as the more flashy and languorous Elonie just beside my platform. Through the rear ranks of listeners moved old white-bearded Sporr, who had much to say to certain members of the throng, perhaps explaining me and my legend.

"Friends," I began at last, "I am new here. A little child might have more experience of your ways and wishes. Yet it becomes apparent that great service is expected of me, and such a service I would greatly love to do."

"Hear! Hear! Wise are the words of Yandro!" Thus went up a new chorus. I felt reassured, and spoke more confidently.

"Your Council has explained much. Now I come to the people represented by that Council. If I am to help, you are to explain how. For the voice of a people is seldom wrong or foolish."

"Wise are the words!" They chorused again, and the man with the deep voice suddenly put up his hand and moved for-

ward. I saw that he had the armor and weapons of a soldier, and in one hand he held a cup, from which he had been drinking. He was fairly well knit for a Dondromogonian, and, though his face was simple, it was manly enough. He cleared his throat diffidently.

"We have been told of Yandro's coming, throughout our halls and dwellings," he began. "That he should ask for our word is an honor. But since he asks, I make bold to reply—" He choked a little. "Peace!" he cried hoarsely. "Peace—and comfort—"

"Peace! Peace!" cried the others around him, and "Peace!" bellowed hundreds of voices.

I was a little perplexed. After the warlike talk of the Council, this was different, and disturbing. But Gederr, beside me was not at a loss.

"Peace you shall have, as Yandro's gift!" he cried. "The Newcomers—ill be their fate—have been warned and promised of his coming, and now they shake in dread! He shall lead you to victory, complete victory, and the fruits of victory!"

It was powerfully said, and the cheering was greater than ever. Under cover of the din, Gederr took my elbow and escorted me from the platform.

"They have been despondent, Yandro. They grow unwilling to face death and wounds. But you have changed all that. Hark to their cries of your name! Now there shall be no more speaking, only happiness."

Elonie had joined us again. Her hand dropped warmly over mine. "This way," she bade. "This wine is for the Council only—the best on Dondromogon. Honor us by taking some."

She gave me a goblet, of some transparent substance clasped in bright metal, and brimming with a red liquor. I took it with a bow, and she lifted her own goblet. As we drank together, I had another impression of Doriza's studying, wondering eyes. Did the warrior-woman, appointed as my military aide, disapprove? But the wine was excellent, and my spirits rose.

"Come," said Elonie. Her arm was through mine again, warm and gently urging. She led me toward a niche, set deep and shadowy into the wall. There was a divan with cushions, and a table

with cups and flagons for drinking. The music had begun again, and some of the people were dancing together.

"Yandro is gracious to grant me these moments alone," purred Elonie. "Yandro is overwhelming."

"Can't we drop the third person?" I asked. "I do not feel much taste for formalities."

She clutched at that with a little cry of gladness and her eyes and smile were radiant. "You offer me intimacy!" she exclaimed. "It's honor—it thrills—" She lifted her glass. "Drink again, I beg you! You and I shall drink to each other."

"Why not?" I said, and touched her glass with mine. "To you, Elonie."

"To you, Yandro, my dear lord!"

THE WINE was galvanizingly strong. I felt my ears ring a little, and—why not admit it?—Elonie's nearness and adulation were wine in themselves. She leaned toward me on the divan, so that our bare shoulders touched. Her lips, full and trembling, were very close.

"Yandro," she whispered. "Yandro . . . you could make me happy, and yourself happy, too . . ."

Suddenly I shook my head a little, to clear it. For her eyes, a moment ago so fascinating, suddenly made me uneasy. It was as if claws had reached from their brightness and fastened upon me. She steadfastly fixed my gaze with hers.

"Yandro . . ." Her voice was soft, monotonous. "All is well with you . . . trust us, trust me, Elonie . . . I shall guide you to victory, you need have no qualms. . . ."

Her arm stole across my chest, curved around my neck. She drew my head toward hers. Her brilliant eyes seemed to fill the whole field of my vision, impelling, hypnotic—

Hypnotic—that was it!

The strange half-lost thoughts from my unknown former life sized the idea and held it up to me. Danger, danger, they were crying at me. Most ungallantly I took her wrist and disengaged myself from her embrace.

"Since I am destined for war, is there time for this?" I asked, trying to laugh.

"Is there not?" she murmured.

I rose from where I sat, and sipped more

wine. Where it had fuddled me before, it cleared me now. "Elonie, you are charming. I do not know whether I have standards by which to judge, but you do things to men. Perhaps I should have time to make up my own mind."

"If I have offended—" she began to stammer.

"Oh, not in the least. But there is so much for me to be sure of."

She, too, rose, and left me without a word. Had I made her angry? Yet her last words had been of apology. I sat down again, alone and mystified.

But I did not remain alone for more than two minutes. Outside the niche, Elonie was talking to Gederr. Gederr scowled, nodded, then with an air of inspiration beckoned to Doriza. Doriza joined them, listened respectfully to Gederr. Finally she nodded, as if in acceptance of orders, and walked toward me.

I rose to meet her. She looked me steadily in the eye, but when she spoke it was hesitantly, and with a shyness most womanly, too womanly for a military person.

"Great Yandro is not pleased with Elonie of the Council. Is it possible that he would prefer another woman—me?"

Just like that, she offered herself. And if ever I had made up my mind in a hurry, it had been to the effect that Doriza was nothing but reserve and prudence.

What answer I might be able to give was suddenly unnecessary.

Just outside the niche angry voices rose. An officer, all fair beard and flapping cloak, was accosting Gederr with something less than the respect due a member of the Council.

"I say, she was promised to me—to me! And to me she goes, for my part in bringing him to you!"

"Silence, Rohbar," commanded Gederr in a voice as sharp as a dagger, but the officer pushed him roughly aside and strode into the niche.

It was the man who had interviewed me after my first capture. His pale eyes gave off sparks in the subdued light, and one hand sought the hilt of his pistol.

"Yandro, they call you!" he flung out. "Yandro, sent from out of space and time to Dondromogon! Well, be that true or no, Doriza is not for you—and deny me

if you dare! I'll send you back out of space and time, with whatever weapon you choose!"

IV

ROHBAR glared, but I could have smiled. Smiled in welcome. He was extricating me from a most embarrassing position. I faced him and spoke steadily.

"My friend, you were rude to me at our first meeting. Now you threaten. I begin to think you don't like me, and that we'll only be happy shedding each other's blood."

"Amen to that!" he snarled. And to Doriza: "Get out, get away from him."

I moved a step closer, and rapped him on the chest with my knuckles. "She came to speak courteously to me, and she shall go only if she so desires." As I spoke, I reflected that she might be worth fighting for, after all. I turned to her.

"Doriza, is this true? Do you belong to Rohbar?"

She shook her bright head, and for once her eyes did not meet mine. I felt a sudden joy and relief, such as Elonie's frank throwing of herself at my head could not bring.

But Rohbar had drawn his pistol-weapon. Another moment, and he would have brought it in line with my chest. But I caught his weapon wrist in my left hand, and with the heel of my right I whacked him solidly on his bearded chin. His head bobbed, and a moment later I had twisted the pistol away from him, throwing it back into the niche. A moment later, Gederr and several others had hurried in, seizing him. He struggled and cursed.

"Put him under arrest!" Gederr bade, and Rohbar ceased struggling. He drew himself up.

"So that's it!" he roared. "Do you think you dare treat me thus, Gederr? I do not care if you're of the Council—I know a secret very close and very valuable—"

"Stop his mouth!" Elonie was imploring, and he cursed her, too.

"It seems," I put in, "that Rohbar makes a practice of rudeness to women."

I got smiles from Elonie and Doriza both, and Rohbar fairly blackened in the face as he strove to pull free and get at me.

"You!" he choked. "Yandro you call yourself—you're a fraud, a figurehead, foisted by these scheming, sneaking Council folk—a living lie!"

"Let him go," I bade those who held him. "Nobody says 'lie' to me and goes unpunished."

There was silence, as far as my voice had reached. Only in the background did music and pleasant conversation continue. It was Elonie who spoke first:

"Yandro, you have privileged me in my speech to you. May I dare point out that this is dangerous—that Rohbar, long a guard officer, is skilled in every weapon—"

"Elonie, you now make it impossible for me to withdraw, without being thought cowardly," I said. I put my hand to the saber I wore. "Is there a quiet place apart? Let the two of us fight."

Rohbar was quiet again, in the hands of his captors. He now spoke, almost as gently as Elonie: "I have no friends here. The fight might not be fair."

"Nonsense," I snapped, and looked past the little group. There was a face I knew—the man with the deep voice. "You," I hailed him, "come here."

He came respectfully, and stood at attention.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Klob is my name, great Yandro. Under-officer of the guard."

"Klob, do you know Rohbar?"

"I do, sir."

"If I, Yandro, ordered you to act as second for a man in a duel, would you perform the office faithfully?"

He braced more stiffly to attention. "Though I died for it, sir."

"You shall not die, but be commended if you do well. Represent Rohbar in the formal duel he is about to fight."

"As Yandro commands. And his adversary—the man he will fight?"

"Me."

KLOB was embarrassed, and so were the others. I spoke sharply. "Am I the one you take for your war leader? Then obey. This man has threatened me. I have been placed in a position where I must fight or be thought cowardly. Come into this passageway."

They followed me. Nobody was in the corridor. I spoke again, and they released

Rohbar. "What weapon?" I asked him.

"Ray-sabers," he growled, and drew his. A touch of his thumb on the hilt-stud, and it glowed brilliantly.

"I shall be second to Yandro, if it pleases him." That was Doriza, my appointed aide. But I waved her back.

"Since we fight, partially at least, for you, it is not well that you take sides," I reminded. "I need no seconds. If play does not continue fair, I can change it."

I drew my own ray-saber. My thumb, seemingly wiser than my blank brain, touched the stud and the blade pulsed out its heat-rays. Those of the Council who had come along moved back out of the way. Rohbar and I touched blades, and the fight was on.

From the first, it was no contest.

Rohbar wore armor, on chest and head, while I fought without. He was in a cold rage, and I was only puzzled. Despite his lesser height, he had strangely long arms, that gave him an inch or two of reach beyond mine. But he was like a child before me. Indeed, I had leisure to observe myself, to wonder and puzzle over my own skill. I knew this weapon, that should be strange to me, as if it were born a part of me. Rohbar slashed and fenced; I parried easily, almost effortlessly. Avoiding an engagement, I clanged home against his armored flank. He moaned and swore, for even through that metal protection the heat of the blade must have hurt him. A moment later I sped a back-hand blow that knocked his helmet flying. He threw caution to the winds, and charged close. So sudden was his attack that I was caught almost unawares, and parried his blade within inches of my own chin. Our blades crossed, close to the guards, and we stood for a moment looking into each other's eyes at a bare foot's distance.

"You ignorant fool!" he spat at me. "To be made a tool, and then to believe—"

"Silence, you crawling informer!" bawled Gederr, and his deadly warning startled Rohbar, who sprang back from me. At the same time I advanced in my turn, touched his blade as if to engage, then cut under quickly and came solidly home where the neck and shoulders join.

The ray-mechanism in my weapon hummed and sang. A great red spark

leaped from the point of contact, and Rohbar, stricken with heat and current alike, spun around like a top. His saber fell, and he went down beside it. There was life in him, for he struggled up on an elbow, turning an agonized face toward me.

"You haven't forgotten *that* skill!" he cried, as if charging me with a crime. "Have you forgotten anything, then? Are you truly here without memory, or are you a traitor to—"

Gederr stepped close to him. He leveled a pistol-device, which threw rays. Rohbar suddenly lacked a head.

"That was the most merciful thing to do," said Gederr, holstering his weapon. "Send someone to drag the rest of him away." He faced me. "Yandro will please accept my admiring congratulations. What better proof of his great gifts and high destiny than this easy conquest of one who was judged skilful with the ray-saber." He strode toward the sound of faint music. "Come, you others. The entertainment has certainly not been spoiled."

I SWITCHED off my saber's power, and sheathed it. I had just killed a man, because I felt I had to, but I had no sense of triumph. I walked at the rear of the group, Doriza moving respectfully beside me.

"Doriza," I said, "he tried to tell me something. What?"

She shook her head. "I did not know Rohbar's mind."

"Yet he felt close to you. Wanted to fight to keep you from me. That's another thing. Why did you ask me if I wanted you?"

She smiled a little, with a certain shy humor. "Do not all things on Dondromogon belong to Yandro?"

I smiled back. "Doriza, perhaps I should act complimented. Yet it seems to me that Gederr and Elonie told you to make the offer. And I'm not sure—I can say this to my personal aide, can't I?—that I want any favors at their hands."

"Or at mine?" And she smiled again.

"Come off it, Doriza, you're not the best of flirts. Shall we take a drink together? It wasn't pleasant, killing that man, though you don't seem to mourn him."

Back in the great chamber, a sort of cloud of light was thrown in the center by several reflectors, and a sort of motion picture show was going on in the midst of it. I drank much, but the wine did not affect me greatly. Finally I felt tired, and said so. Gederr and Doriza escorted me to sumptuous apartments, where I quickly slept.

I do not know how many hours I lay asleep, but I woke refreshed. A breakfast of strange synthetic foods was waiting, on a lift that rode up in a slot of the wall. I ate with relish, took a brisk shower in a room behind my sleeping quarters, and returned the costume of Yandro. Then came a buzz at the door, and a voice came through a speaker system: "Gederr requests that Yandro admit him."

I opened the door. Gederr was there, and Doriza behind him. I felt the gaze of her blue eyes, very soft and pretty. Gederr smiled respectfully.

"We have talked much about the duel, we of the Council. It is agreed that great Yandro's value is more than inspirational. If a single combat could be arranged, with some champion of the Newcomers, ill be their fate! Some boasting successor to Barak—"

"Barak," I repeated and wondered again why his name stuck so in my fogged mind. "I—I do not know how to say it, but I seek no quarrel with Barak. I do not fear him, or anyone else; but I do not wish to fight him."

"Barak is dead," snapped Gederr, quite ungraciously. "Yandro need have no apprehensions."

"I have said I fear nobody," I reminded, stiff and lofty.

Gederr bowed. "Who could doubt it? But to return to our talk of battle; at the South Pole an inner blaze of flame from within Dondromogon has kept opposing forces from contacting each other. Only here at the North Pole can we fight, and there has been a lull since—since the destruction of their champion, Barak. We have taken advantage to hollow out a great pocket underground. See, I will show you."

He went to a little televiso screen, and switched on the power, then dialed. I saw a great domed cavern, larger than the hemisphere room of last night's recreation

period. Around its edges toiled men with ray-batons, shaping and enlarging.

"Elsewhere we have set up cunning defenses," explained Gederr. "Great force-fields, that interfere with their digging advance. But at one point we have purposely allowed their advance tunnels to come along easily. What you see here is behind that point. We fall back—"

"Fall back?" I repeated.

GEDERR winked. "Their forces will follow, and fill this chamber. Beyond, we have entrenchments, sortie tunnels, weapons. And the floor of the chamber is mined—enough explosive even to wreck those power-shields. Their van, with its heavy equipment, will perish. We'll wipe out the others easily!"

"How many?" ventured Doriza.

"Who can say?" Gederr responded. "They are many, but most of them must work to sustain life and action in the section of Dondromogon they have seized. They have not the sunken cities, the synthesizing advances, the other time-seasoned devices for living that we have developed. Several hundred fighting men, not many more than ours, are all that can be sent against us."

"Are they brave?" I demanded.

"They have stubborn courage. They will rush after their comrades who fall. Perhaps if we capture a few, they will try a rescue. It will bring them to defeat—us to glory!"

His voice rose in exultation, and I chose to disagree.

"Not glory, Gederr. We can claim cunning for such a plan—yes. The pride of successful ambush and deceit—yes. But there is hardly any glory in trickery. Not as I see it, anyway."

He bowed again. "Great Yandro is bravest of the brave, but his thoughts are those of the First Comers, ages ago. He does not understand modern sophistication and practicality."

"I understand the practicality," I assured him, "but I don't glory in it. A fair combat, like the one last night with Rohbar, is like a game—grim, but like a game. Not so these stratagems and pitfalls, which are only an unpleasant job to be done."

"The stratagems need not affect Yandro," stated Gederr. "As for a simple

single combat, I say that will be arranged. We broadcast, Yandro will remember, a warning and a challenge. The enemy has sent back a message that they are making ready a fighter to face anyone we can furnish."

"I see," said I. "Well, they speak my language." Both Doriza and Gederr started violently, and stared. "Probably they are simple of battle-viewpoint, like me. They'll blunder easily into your trap." I said those last two words to assure Gederr that I considered the whole deception his. "Now, when is all this to happen?"

"Perhaps within twenty hours. Perhaps within thirty."

"I feel like a puppet," I said. "Like the figurehead poor Rhobar called me. Perhaps I am, and perhaps it is as well, because I'm not in tune with your strategy. Understand me, I see its need and its practicability. That is all I see, though."

"Will Yandro walk forth?" asked Doriza. "There are troops waiting to be reviewed."

We went into a corridor, and entered one of the purring vehicles. It took us away—toward the fighting sector, I judged—and I dismounted in a great low stretch of subterranean cavern. This was lighted by great glowing bulbs hung to the ceiling, and men were drawn up in triple rows, armed and at attention. An officer was speaking to them, and toward one side stood the two unarmed men, under guard.

"Not yet, mighty Yandro," counselled Doriza beside me. "There is—a ceremony."

I could hear the officer speaking, though not clearly:

"In this moment, the eve of certain triumph over the enemy, two men see fit to circulate lies that calculate to dismay and destroy our plans. For them is only one fate, as judged by the Council. Attention to that fate!"

The two unarmed men were marched forward. I stared and scowled.

"I've seen them before," I said to Doriza. "The broad face of one—the figure of the other! Aren't they—"

"Yes!" Doriza said tonelessly.

The officer lifted his hand, with a disintegrator pistol in it. Pale green rays leaped. The two familiar figures gyrated, great parts of them vanished. They fell,

and two men carried the bodies away.

"They were the two guards I first met!" I cried.

"Yes," she agreed softly. "Men who served under Rohbar, and who spoke rebelliously because Yandro killed him. They said that Yandro was not Yandro."

I smiled ruefully. "From the first they didn't seem to believe that. Nor did Rohbar. Nor did you, until Sporr identified me." I looked into her blue eyes, calculatingly. "It comes to mind, Doriza, that of all who doubted me you are the only one left alive."

"I, too, have thought that," she said, and her voice was quiet but not frightened. "Perhaps my turn is next."

I shook my head. "I seem to have power on Dondromogon, and I will not let you be destroyed without more warrant than I see now."

"Yandro is kind," she said.

"And Doriza is attractive," I rejoined. "Well, that unpleasant little formality seems to be at an end. Shall we inspect the troops?"

SO SAYING, I moved forward. The officer in charge saluted and accompanied me on my inspection. The first two ranks of soldiers were men of various builds and feature, solemn-looking fellows for the most part. The first rank was headed by Klob, whom I had named for Rohbar's second last night. I was struck by the efficient air of their armor and equipment, as contrasted with their almost frail physiques. Again I thought, the stock of Dondromogon's natives must be running down.

The third rank was women.

They, too, wore armor, and bore weapons and tools, but I judged that they were more of a reserve than a first fighting force. More thoughts coursed through my head—if my earlier memories were departed, they left the more room for recent happenings and speeches. The Council had insisted that it was necessary to keep the population of Dondromogon small, for the sake of good living. Yet it seemed false reasoning if even women must be armed for battle. And the women, on the whole, were better specimens than the men. They were not large—none anywhere near as tall as Elonie or as com-

pactly vigorous as Doriza—but seemed healthy and intelligent for the most part, and some were even handsome. One or two gave me an appraising, admiring look, such as soldiers should not give frankly to commanders.

I concluded the inspection, and returned to a position in front of the force. "At ease," I bade them. "I have words to say.

"Some, at least, must have seen me last night at the recreation hour. I spoke then as to the general population of Dondromogon. Now I speak to you specifically, as soldiers facing battle duty. Your commanders think that the time is at hand for a victorious termination of the war with those strangers you call the New-comers."

I paused, and watched the expressions of my listeners. At the phrase, "termination of the war," some of them positively yearned. As Gederr had admitted, the commoners of Dondromogon wanted no more fighting. Perhaps my coming was indeed by providence, to bring peace. A better peace, I now decided, than they had ever known.

"When the war is over," I went on, "I propose to lead you still. Since I am accepted as a leader, I have a right to do that. It seems that your health and happiness will be bettered if, in some way, we achieve a new conquest—conquest of the outdoors. There may be storms, but there are also natural sunlight and fresh air. Yes, and perhaps fresh natural foods, that will strengthen you more than synthetics. Does that appeal to you?"

Plainly it did.

"As to the Newcomers, I do not know them. Yet it seems that, with the fighting ended, some friendly agreement may be reached. If they do not harm us, they may help us. That will follow victory. I feel thus assured. That is all I have to say." I faced the officer in charge. "Take over."

Doriza and I walked away, back to our vehicle. "Where now?" I asked.

For answer, she pointed to a white oblong on the inner wall of the vehicle. It was a little screen, on which figures appeared. "Gederr requests that we return to him. He feels that we may be too close to possible violent action, and he is not yet ready that Yandro risk himself."

We rolled back toward the main passages of the community, and eventually to an office, where Gederr was in close, muttered conversation with Sporr and Elonie. They greeted my entrance in various ways—Sporr with a senile smirk that he hoped was ingratiating, Elonie with a most inviting smile, Gederr with blank embarrassment. Gederr bowed and gestured toward an inner door. "Will Yandro pleasure me with a private conference?"

I bowed in turn, and followed him in.

"I heard Yandro's words to the troops, by speaker system," he began silkily. "Eloquent and inspiring—but Yandro must realize some salient facts."

"Such as?" I prompted.

"The talk of friendly agreement with the Newcomers—ill be their fate! They must be wiped clean off of Dondromogon."

"Perhaps," I agreed, and he smiled.

"I am honored that Yandro agrees so quickly—"

"I said, perhaps. Because I do not know the Newcomers as yet. It may be that they deserve death to the last man. But they may also deserve honorable treatment, alliance even."

He opened his mouth to speak again, but interruption came from outside. Sounds of struggle, and the cry of Doriza:

"Help me—help!"

I bounded to the door and tore it open, injuring the automatic lock. An officer stood in the outer office, and two soldiers had Doriza by the wrists. I made a lunge, knocked one of them spinning against a wall. "What is this?" I roared. "She is my aide."

"Her arrest has been commanded," spoke up Elonie in a sullen voice.

"Who commanded it? I countermand it!" I faced the roomful of protesting faces. "You call me Yandro, your leader from divine source. Let me say that nothing will happen to Doriza except by my will."

Gederr spoke from the inner doorway: "Great Yandro speaks in riddles. I had thought that he had no attachment for Doriza."

"Oh, you tried to make me a gift of her last night," I exploded, "but that has nothing to do with the present case. Doriza lives. She remains free. Understand?"

"Perhaps," mused Sporr, as if to him-

self. "There have been accidents. . . ."

"Come," I said to Doriza. "To my quarters." I faced the others again. "Danger to her shall be answered by me. Is it understood?"

We rode silently in the vehicle, and came to the rooms set aside for me. Once inside, I made sure that speaking tubes and television were turned off. Then:

"Doriza! There are things I do not know. Tell them to me."

She hung her head. "They would have seen me dead, like the others, to shut my mouth."

"And I saved you. Now speak. All I seem to find familiar is the name of Barak."

She looked up again. "You remember the name?"

"Faintly. Vaguely. But what is happening just beyond my knowledge?"

She caught me by the forearm, her small, strong hands gripped like vises.

"I'll tell you! Tell you everything! Those devils of the Council have long exploited and drained Dondromogon—with lies about the First Comers, and the exclusive use of science! The Newcomers are to be-trapped through you, the natives deluded through you! But you—you are to die when your usefulness is through!"

"They'd do that?" I demanded. "After they name me as Yandro, their legendary hero?"

"That's part of the great lie!" And Doriza was sobbing. "You aren't Yandro—you're *Barak of the Newcomers!*"

V

I STARED at her, astounded, shocked—and suddenly remembering things.

"Barak," I repeated foolishly. "Barak. Yes, I *am* Barak. I—how did I get here? Things are still so shadowy—but I'm beginning to recollect—"

"Try," she begged. "Try hard. It's the only way you can save yourself. Let me remind you; this world called Dondromogon was settled long ago by adventurers. For centuries their descendants built up a luxurious way of living. Messages filtered back to the old home planet—Earth, in the Solar System—"

"I remember that much," I told her. "Something about a group of chiefs grow-

ing fat on the labor of the community, and killing those who threatened to rival them?"

"Yes. Calling those deaths necessary for the good of the race, but preserving really the soft and easily ruled of the race. And an expedition was sent, to point out that Dondromogon really was a colony of Mother Earth. Gederr received the Newcomers with false welcome, and tried to have them assassinated. But reinforcements arrived, and the war goes on—"

Again I did not let her finish. "And Gederr has been deceiving his followers, by the line of talk I heard from him! That the Newcomers are not rescuers or dealers of justice, but invaders and destroyers! I remember that, too!"

"Do you remember yourself?" she demanded. "Barak, the wonder warrior, who met the enemy by twos and threes, and conquered them like flies, like puffs of wind? Barrak, mighty in battle, who offered to fight the whole Council of Dondromogon single-handed? Who led one digging assault after another, and who fell only to a stupid trick?"

"I don't remember that last," I confessed. "It is in my mind that I was somewhat rash, and had skill and luck enough to live in spite of my rashness, through several combats."

"No time for modesty!" she chided me, and smiled despite the desperation of our plight. "You were a natural engine of warfare, Barak. And once you pursued your retreating adversaries far—too far—until it was Gederr himself who squirted anaesthetic gas upon you and felled you, senseless. Then they gathered around you, like carrion feeders, that whole Council, to see how they could profit best. And Gederr and Elonie, with Sporr's help, made the decision."

Her eyes held mine earnestly. "As you began to revive, with your wits still unguarded and baffled, Sporr and Elonie hypnotized you. They both know how to do that—"

"I fought off Elonie's hypnotism last night," I remembered.

"Because your knowledge of its danger remained in your subconscious. After that, you were placed outside—naked, without memory or knowledge. And a speaking device brought what would sound like a

cosmic voice of destiny. After that, all was prepared to draw you into their plot as a tool."

I groaned. It had been as simple and raw as all that. "But the legend of Yandro?" I asked.

She waved it aside. "Someone named Yandro did exist, in the old days when Dondromogon was not Council-ridden. When he died, it was suggested that he would return again in time of need. Many a time did Gederr inspire some better-than-ordinary fighting man to face you, Barak, by telling him that the soul of Yandro had awakened in him. But when you fell into their hands and they decided to use you, they twisted the legend to suit your coming—even with a picture and your own thumb print to help convince you." She sighed. "Very few had seen your capture. Only Rohbar and the two guards you saw die would recognize you. Those three men, and myself, were in the farce."

"YOU!" I said, and gazed at her. That lost former life was creeping back, like a dream becoming plain and fusing into reality.

"You, Doriza! I—remember you—"

"You should," she murmured, pink-cheeked. "We used to say kind things to each other. With the Newcomers—remember?"

"You were one of us—a year ago! A technician in the synthetics department! But you vanished—and now you're here! Why?"

"I—I—oh, don't ask me that!"

I clutched her elbow, so fiercely that she whimpered. "Did you turn traitor? Answer me, Doriza!"

"You hurt me—don't—Barak, before you call me a traitor, answer this. Are you wholly for destruction of this people of Dondromogon? Haven't you changed?"

"Why—why—" And I paused. "I want to crush the Council, but the people—"

"Barak, I want to help them, too! The people—and you, Barak!" She looked at me beseechingly. "Can't you trust me?"

My heart flopped over and over, like a falling leaf, but I could not steel myself against her. "You were sweet once, Doriza, though you went away from

me." As if by long practice, my arm encircled her.

"Believe me, I'm not a traitor," she whispered against my shoulder. "I want to save you—and others—and myself—"

I shook my head. "They want to kill you. They shan't. Let's defend ourselves."

For answer, she pointed to the door. A quiet humming sounded. I saw that a panel bulged and vibrated.

"Disintegrator," she whispered in my ear.

I thrust her into a corner and moved close to the door-jamb. A moment later the rayed panel fell away in flakes, and a man stepped through, the officer who had tried to arrest Doriza.

I clutched the wrist of the hand that held his disintegrator pistol, and almost tore his head off with an uppercut. He went down, and Doriza caught up his weapon as it fell. There was a spatter of sparks as someone fired through the hole with electro-automatic pellets, but already Doriza was using the ray to knock a lock from a door beyond.

"One side," I heard Gederr growl from the corridor. "I have a disintegrator, too. I'll open a hole too big for him to defend!"

But we had hurried through the door Doriza opened. Beyond was a vehicle, the same that had carried us earlier in the day. "In," she said, took the controls.

We rumbled away, not daring to speed and thus attract too much attention. Doriza drove us toward the point where conflict was being centered, and at a deserted stretch of the tunnelway braked us to a halt.

"We must know what they're doing about us," she said, and began to tune the televiso apparatus.

Figures leaped into view on the screen. I stared. Members of the Council—I recognized them—were marshalled against a wall, as if for a firing squad. And a firing squad faced them. Someone lifted a hand as a signal. The line of soldiers lifted their electro-automatics. I saw the play of sparks, heard the whip and thud of pellets. A form fell, another, another.

"They're rebelling!" I cried. "Overthrowing the Council! Somehow," and my heart sang wildly, "they know the truth!"

But Doriza put her hand on mine, and it trembled. "No, Barak. Watch."

One of the riddled forms floundered and tried to rise. Elonie, no longer lovely, but an agonized and gory victim. Someone stepped forward and coolly shot her through the head. It was Gederr.

He faced forward. They brought broadcasting equipment to him, and he suddenly grew huge on the screen.

"Attention," he bawled, "all true people of Dondromogon! We do not hesitate to kill traitors, even the highest of rank! Those false folk who made up the Council—they have died!"

He paused, glared, and swallowed. "I, Gederr, have discovered their plot! They foisted off upon us a man of the New-comers as Yandro—caused us to accept him as a hero, when he was only the tool of their plan to betray and sell us!"

A cheer came from somewhere, and he went on.

"They are dead! I remain to lead and protect you! And my command is, find the false spy we accepted as Yandro! Search for him, find him and kill him!"

DORIZA and I looked at each other. "Where now?" she asked.

"Toward the battle zones," I replied. She closed a circuit and steered us away.

The main corridor was almost deserted—apparently non-combatants had been cleared out in anticipation of the battle. Again the speaker began to yammer, Gederr speaking again:

"All defenses on alert! Watch for this man, falsely called Yandro—very tall, strongly made, dark, young, scar on chin. He wears a red cloak. With him is a woman of medium height, young, light brown hair, blue eyes, more robust than common—"

"Not flattering, are they?" Doriza said, and smiled.

Up ahead, two guards gestured and bawled. One pressed a wall-button, and a folding barrier crept across our way. "Vehicles out of running," said a guard as we slowed up.

"We're on the trail of those spies!" I yelled from the dark interior. "Get that barrier out of our way!"

They hesitated, and Doriza threw in the speed-ahead lever. We smashed through

and away. Cries rang in our wake, and slugs struck the rear of the vehicle. Two burned clear through the metal. I opened a panel to kick them out, and they scorched my foot, clear through the stout shoe sole.

"We must abandon this car, it's marked." Doriza was cutting speed. "Let's jump, here in the shadows."

I jumped through the open panel, and managed to stay on my feet, catching and helping Doriza as she jumped after me. The car hummed onward, and smashed loudly into the wall beyond. Guards ran into view from a doorway, chattering loudly.

Every back was toward us. We stole forward, and into the guardroom they had abandoned. I saw dials and mechanism of both televiso and speaker system. A couple of twists and pulls, and I had them out of commission.

"Slovenly discipline," I growled. "They should have left at least one man in charge."

Dropping the telltale red cloak Doriza had given me—how long ago? Yesterday?—I caught up instead a blue military cape, the property of some officer. There was also an ornate helmet, which I jammed on my head. "Stoop," Doriza counseled. "You're taller than any man on Dondromogon. Now, maybe you'll get away with—whatever you're getting away with."

Emerging, I strode toward the wreck. A man saw my cape and helmet of authority. "Attention!" he called, and they stiffened respectfully.

"How close is the point of contact with the enemy?" I demanded with official brusqueness.

One pointed the way. "Not far, sir. We're the last message-relay station. Everything's in order, and—"

"Thanks," I said, and beckoned Doriza. We walked past. I wondered what I could have done if these men had paused to think I might be the culprit for whom Gederr was clamoring.

Up ahead was a cross-tunnel, and beyond that a fork. We heard men talking and moving in the distance. Doriza pointed to an inscribed door.

"The way to the works below. I've seen it on the televiso. The mined floor of the main chamber has a second cavern below."

7—Planet—Summer.

I scowled. "As I remember, Gederr said he had blocked all advance tunnels of the Newcomers, except at one spot. What kind of explosives will he use?"

"Glare-rays," said Doriza. "You wouldn't know, Barak, the Newcomers haven't any such. It's a special vibration-speed that sets atoms at a pitch ready to fly violently apart. Anything it involves can be exploded at the first touch of fire."

"Anything?" I repeated. "Weapons, men, earth? Doriza, can you operate such a ray?"

"I think I can."

"Then come," and I pushed open the panel.

The elevator cage was waiting, and its operation not hard to study out. Quickly we sped down and stepped forth into another great chamber, bright and echoing. A sentry confronted us.

"Your pass?" he demanded.

I chose to bluster it out. "What kind of idling goes on here?" I snapped at him. "I'm from the Council, to see if the report is true—that you haven't made all ready for the ambush."

"But we have," he protested.

"You give me arguments, you insolent upstart? Where's your commander?" I turned to face an officer that hurried up. "This sentry needs to be disciplined, taught respect for his superiors," I scolded. "What have you to say, sir, about the laxity and slowness of work here?"

"But we're ready and more than ready," the officer assured me. "Look, sir," and he pointed. "This whole cavern is dug out to completion, the overhead roof thinned for the explosion. See the play of glares upon it."

I LOOKED, and nodded as if in sour agreement. The earth floor was a maze of cables and coils, and here and there, strategically placed, were little wheeled stands with mechanisms atop. From each of these beat upward a cone of glaring golden light against the rough ceiling. It blinded me to look at them.

"The glares," Doriza murmured.

I gazed at the men on duty. "Is nobody armed? What if the Newcomers get in here?"

The officer shook his head. "You know that weapons would be our own destruc-

tion. Electro-automatics, disintegrators, ray-sabers—they all give off flame. And a touch of flame in any one of these glare-fields would explode the whole chamber, and the solid soil around it, into atoms."

I glanced toward the far end. "Up yonder I see no glares."

"Of course not. Beyond and above is the point that coincides with the narrow approach left for the Newcomers." The officer studied me narrowly. "If you are from the Council, why are you ignorant of all these things?"

It would be a difficult question to answer plausibly, but I was spared the task. Someone hurried from a little televiso shack and saluted the officer.

"Orders, sir. Important. We're to withdraw immediately. The Newcomers are advancing, and the forces above will take over operation."

"Of course," the officer said, and turned from me to shout commands. Men began to hurry away past us, toward the elevator, eager to quit the post of danger.

"Come, Doriza," I said softly, and she followed me along a wall. "Here's one of those explosion mechanisms. If we can bring it between us—"

She did something to turn it off, and we trundled it along on its wheels. I pointed to the spot above which the entry-point was said to be, and toward it we went, unchallenged and unnoticed. We reached the earthy far wall, and it was steep, but with the point of my ray-saber I dug pits for hands and toes. Up I scrambled to the ceiling. There I paused, hanging like a bat.

"Disintegrator," I called down to her.

"Dare we?"

"We must dare!"

She tossed me the disintegrator pistol. I turned it on and fate favored me once again. No explosion occurred. I tunneled upward, upward, and climbed up the slanting chimney-like tunnel I made. Moments later, I broke into open air above.

I was in a necklike passage. Lying flat, I looked each way. To one hand was a great cavern, the ambush-space, in which Dondromogon's warriors were cautiously ranging themselves. Opposite was a wide tunnel, empty as yet—a work of the Newcomers, into which this passage had been invitingly opened by the defenders. I was

not observed as, rising to my knees, I tore my cape into strips and knotted them into a line.

I lowered it. "Fasten on the glare-ray," I told Doriza, and when she had done so I drew it up. After it climbed Doriza herself.

"Now what?" she demanded. "I haven't had time to ask."

"Turn on the glare. Like that, yes—set it against one wall, and let it fall on the opposite, to fill this little passageway through which they must pass to fight each other."

The golden glow sprang into being. At the same moment a shout rose from the direction of the corridor. A patrol of Newcomers appeared, and others behind.

I sprang erect.

"Attention, all!" I roared at the top of my lungs. "Fire no shots, send no rays, or you will all perish in the explosion! You came to fight, exterminate! But I—I, Barak, the foremost fighter on this planet—am here to see that it does not happen!"

And I drew the saber at my side.

VI

I STRUCK a pose as I stood there. I hoped that a grim and heroic attitude might give them pause.

"It's Barak!" said an officer at the forefront of the Newcomers.

"Barak!" echoed a warrior of Dondromogon. I heard a rattle and clink of weapons.

"Remember," I made haste to call out, "a bullet or ray will tear this place—and both forces—to bits! I'll perish, and so will every man on either side, as far as the explosion reaches!"

The Newcomers were only a trifle mystified, but the Dondromogon party, which knew what was beneath us, wavered. Those in the front rank appeared to give back a little. The Newcomers saw this beyond me, and made to move forward. Their officer, he who had recognized me, gestured outward with his arms to make some sort of battle formation. "Rush through," he said, "and fight it out in the clear beyond."

"Come on if you dare!" blared an officer of Dondromogon.

"Let nobody dare," I said, "unless he thinks he can fight his way past me."

The Newcomers paused in turn. "Barak," said the officer, "don't you know us? Don't you know me?"

I did know him, now that he spoke again. "You're Harvison, aren't you?" I hailed him. "Don't be the first I must kill." I wheeled around. "My challenge isn't to the Newcomers alone. I said, nobody shall pass through. My sword, if not my voice, will stop this war, here and now."

I heard a laugh, deep and familiar. Gederr had come among his troops.

"That's logic for you!" he mocked me. "Barak was always a man of blood! He'll kill us all to stop this slaughter. Someone finish him."

One of his lieutenants spoke to two of the foremost men, who stepped forward, rifles at the ready.

"If they shoot—" began Doriza tremulously.

"If they do, they destroy everyone!" I reminded yet again. "Come, who dares. Swords if you will, but no fire!"

The officer who had given the order stepped between the two soldiers, saber drawn. "Ready to rush," he said. "My blade, your butts—"

They approached, side by side. Their faces were set, grim. They faltered for only a moment at the entry to the glare field.

In that moment I rushed them.

They hadn't expected that, three against one. I shouted, and hurled myself at the soldier on the left. He made to dodge, and the officer opposed his own saber; but I spun away from it and before the other soldier knew my mind I was upon him. I could not use the ray in my blade, but it drove past his hastily lifted gun-barrel and struck his mailed shoulder so heavily that he dropped his weapon. Stepping in close, I uppercut him with the curved hilt as with a mailed fist.

Leaping over his falling form, I was upon the officer. A single twist, and I had his saber in my left hand. Two blows sent him staggering back. I parried a blow from the rifle-stock of the remaining soldier with my left-hand blade, while with my right I stabbed him in the side. He, too, retreated, clutching his wound. I

waved my blood-streaming weapons.

"Who next?" I called.

Harvison made stout reply:

"You're mad, Barak. I know I'm no match for you, nobody is—but here I come!"

He came, and his fellows. They all tried to crowd at once into that narrow corridor, and hampered each other. I had a mighty sweep with both my swords, spanning twelve full feet with them—enough for my purpose. At my first parry I turned aside three points at once, disengaged, and got home on poor Harvison, through the shoulder. He sank to one knee, and further impeded his friends. I made a sweeping cut with both blades, and despite themselves they gave back.

"This is monotonous," I taunted them. "Make it exciting."

"Rush at his back," I heard Gederr yelling.

"Careful!" Doriza warned me. And then another voice I knew, deep and stout: "I won't let them! Yandro, or Barak, or whoever you are—I'm with you!"

"Klob!" I yelled joyously over my shoulder. "I should have known I could count on you!"

He had rushed, facing about at my very shoulder-blades. I heard the snick of his glade against another weapon. Doriza again cried a warning, to Klob this time, and he scored on his adversary, for he snorted triumphantly. Then the Newcomers surged at me again.

I COULD not kill my own people. I strove to wound only. Three staggered back, out of the fight, but the others pressed me bravely. Both my swords must be everywhere at once. My breath began to come quickly, my mind floundered here and there for new stratagems. The saving answer came, not from my own brain, but from Klob.

"You!" I heard him address a new adversary. "You want to kill me? Truly?"

"Why—" panted the other. "Why, no—Klob—why kill—"

"You were my friend!" Klob harangued him. "Turn here with me! A chance for an end of war! Will you—won't you? If not, defend yourself, and I could always fence better—"

"I'm with you, Klob," the other agreed,

rather sullenly. And then he stood by Klob.

At that moment I beat the biggest of my own adversaries to his knees, and the others stood off. I stole a quick glance around. Klob had been joined by his late opponent, a short but well-knit warrior armed with both sword and rifle. It gave me hope and an inspiration.

"Fools!" I said, pointing my swords. "You won't trust me, when I only want to help you, and these other fools who have been fighting you! You can't conquer me! So join me!"

"Why?"

That was Harvison, again on his feet, holding a bloody hand to his wound. The query was enough to slow up the others. They listened, and I had time and wit to reply.

"A handful of rulers, with blind ambition, caused the war. They're mostly gone. I want peace, a chance to bring both sides together."

"Stop his traitor mouth!" cried someone far back.

"Who's afraid to hear?" I yelled. "You almost walked into a trap, and I stopped you. These defenders have mined the cavern beyond—"

"He tells the truth, you Newcomers!" Klob seconded me. "If you can't understand truth and tell it from lies—*look out*, they come!"

He meant his own late comrades. Gederr had urged a fresh body at us.

"Quick!" I cried. "They heard me tell of their ambush, they want to silence me! Won't anyone help!"

"I will," gurgled Harvison, wounded as he was. He stepped past me, sword in his left hand, and engaged a Dondromogon warrior. Another big Newcomer leaped forward to do likewise. I seized my opportunity.

"Don't move without my order!" I addressed the remainder of Harvison's party, as if they were my allies again. "These defenders have the advantage of you in their planted explosives!"

"Then destroy them some other way," growled an under-officer.

I whirled toward the Dondromogon front. The attackers fell back.

"You still scare any man you look at, Barak," said Harvison. He was a little tottery from loss of blood, but game. "Well,

shall we charge?" He managed a grin.

"I've been trying to keep you from doing that," I groaned. "I don't want tragedy here and extermination afterward. Can't this world stand peace—"

"If you can do it," someone said behind me, "I give you full authority."

I knew him. He was Dr. Thorald—high in the Newcomer command. With him were the other leaders, Parkeson and Captain Cross.

"Danger!" I gasped at them. "Don't come through here. Doriza, see that they do not—" I looked for her. She was not there.

"She slipped away while we fought," said Klob. "First setting the glare-lamp to run—"

My heart sank. "Which way did she go? Toward the Newcomers, or toward Dondromogon?"

"Toward Dondromogon," he said, and my heart sank the rest of the way.

She had decided to betray me after all.

"Wait here, all," I commanded, and moved clear of the glare-field. Moved straight toward the host of Dondromogon.

Gederr laughed again. I could read his thoughts. He had clinched his own power by judicious murders. Now he thought I was in his hands. "Shoot him down," he bade.

"Let no man shoot," I warned. "A pellet flying past me will strike and set off the glare-field. It's still swords, and in the open we can use their rays."

I flicked on my own. The blade glowed like hot iron.

"Come and fight," I invited. "All of you. Or withdraw and explode this trap on me alone."

"He's tired of life," snarled Gederr, hidden in the ranks.

"I'm tired of this fighting," was my reply. "If I die alone, the Newcomer force remains intact. It can move upon you and force you to peace. Men of Dondromogon, overthrow this coward tyrant Gederr, who defends his pride and power with your bodies!"

I think they indicated that they knew the truth of that, and Gederr knew it, too. At any rate, he moved boldly to reestablish his influence.

"I'll prove he lies! I hide nowhere!" The words fairly rang out. "Retreat,

quickly, to the positions behind. Leave me to face him."

THEY FELL back, quickly and orderly. Of a sudden I found myself in that big cave, and Gederr before me, no more than twenty paces distant. He held his ray-saber, glowing and ready, in his right hand. In his left was some sort of silvery cylinder. He grinned murderously.

"You offer yourself as a sacrifice," he said, "and I accept you."

I moved toward him, my body in line with the glare-field.

"You overgrown bully-swordsman," he taunted. "An ounce of my brain can defeat a ton of your big lumpy muscles."

"Explode the mine," I said. "It will take us both. You can't retreat out of both my reach and the explosion's."

"Can't I?"

He held up his cylinder. "Here's the fuse. By remote control it can set off all, or any part I select. Understand before you die, Barak. I'll blow up a small area, and you with it, as soon as you set foot where I want."

His broad face sniggered. "Oh, you've played into my hands from the first! You tried to disrupt—you only gave me an excuse to wipe out the rest of that Council, and take all power for myself. Now I'll kill you. Will you come on? Or retreat, and die as you flee? Or just stand there, like a captive statue?"

I continued my advance upon him. "You're lying," I said, but my heart told me that for once he was not.

"Your life is in my hands," he said. "You don't know what moment will see your own feet carrying you to your death. Come, pursue me, brave Barak, stupid Barak. Let your last thought be this—your death helps me immeasurably."

"You're lying," I said again, and he laughed again.

"Reflect. Let your thick skull filter these facts. I shall destroy you. To my followers I will be a hero. Your own Newcomers will pause and wonder. I can record my defenses, and most of the planted mines will remain to check any advance—"

Forgetting all caution, all planning, I charged him. He turned and ran like Don-dromogon's outer winds.



LOST

Where'll I eat?

Where'll I Sleep?

Where's my girl?

Last week on KP I kept thinking, "When I get to New York on my furlough, that'll be the day!"

So here I am, only I don't know my way around any more'n the Man From Mars. Can't even find my girl in this whale of a station.

Tell me: what's a guy to do?

Listen, soldier, sailor, marine! We'll find a room for you, a good place to eat.

We'll even help you find your girl, who's probably hovering around this minute, looking for you.

That's what the Travelers Aid is here for—at the booth with the kindly light—to help you out!

TRAVELERS AID SOCIETY



FREE ▶ 123 service men's lounges headed by those in Grand Central and Penn Stations, New York, 2,000 booths to help the troubled traveler, service man or civilian, friendly service for those who find themselves stranded, all this and more, without charge, is rendered throughout the country daily by the Travelers Aid Society.

But I had taken no more than half a dozen steps in pursuit when all the thunders and lightnings of the universe seemed to burst around me.

I fell, swiftly and deeply, into black nothingness.

I WAS able to establish which way was up, which down, and that I lay horizontally, as if floating in liquid or upon clouds. My ears hummed a trifle, and a voice spoke.

"He will be all right."

Dr. Thorald! I opened my eyes, and they were blurred. I lifted a hand to them, and moaned despite myself.

"Were you killed, too?" I muttered.

"Killed? Not me. Nobody was killed, except that fat pig you met in the cavern. Not enough of him left to make a funeral worth while." Thorald looked behind him. "Ahoy, Parkeson! Cross! Barak's going to be all right."

The other two heads of the Newcomer expedition pushed into view, and looked down upon me where I lay.

"High time," grumbled Parkeson. "They're yelling for him—both sides. Barak, you'll have to drop all your weapons and take up political economy. I greatly fear you'll have a world to run."

"World?" I echoed stupidly. "What world?" My head cleared a bit. "Where's Doriza?"

"The fighting's over," Parkeson soothed me. "Just as you forced it to be. I'm still trying to decide whether you were an epic hero or an epic idiot, there at the cross-ways of battle, making us all stop, or fight you! But your hunch paid off. The entire Council of Dondromogon is dead, and—"

"Doriza," I said again.

"Somebody named Klob, a sturdy soldierly chap, is taking charge. An old sneak named Sporr tried to foment a counter-rising, but Klob disintegrated him. However, the army of Dondromogon still holds an inner defense—says it doesn't trust us quite. Wants only you to assure it that we mean peace. Feel like getting up, Barak?"

Dr. Thorald leaned over. "You've engineered this yourself, Barak, or maybe you didn't engineer it—maybe you only bulled

it through. So I won't put words in your mouth, or thoughts in your head. But tell those deluded people to start by trusting us. And you know that they can. Nobody wanted war less than I. Peacetime endeavor on Dondromogon is quite difficult and exciting enough."

"Doriza," I said yet again, and then, "All right, gentlemen. You won't tell me about her. Maybe you don't dare. But how did I survive?"

"Oh, that?" put in Captain Cross. "Don't you know? The explosion was set off prematurely, to trap and destroy Gederr. It blew him to atoms, but you were clear of it. You had a bad tumble into the lower chamber—"

Now I sat up. "Never tell me that he bungled it that badly! Gederr was a tyrant and coward and murderer, but not a bungler!"

"He was to some extent. Is your head clear? Now we can begin to explain."

Cross subsided, and Dr. Thorald took up the tale: "We sent a spy among them, a long time back, a spy that would pretend to be renegading from us. The spy was good, but got a rather visionary idea, like your own—that peace was better than war between us."

"Practically treason," opined Parkeson sagely.

"We might have held a court-martial and an execution," went on Dr. Thorald, "but for you. Because you seemed to plan out all this Horatius-at-the-bridge coup. And just when we thought it had achieved success—we thought you were failing."

"And up bobs our ex-spy, and sets off the explosion," chimed in Cross. "Sets it off to destroy Gederr and save you. And that left them without a leader to order battle, and they were more than glad to talk peace."

"What," I growled, "has all this to do with Doriza?"

"Why," grinned Dr. Thorald, "they're yelling for her, too, to lead in the final peace talks. Because, you see, she was our spy, our pseudo-renegade, who set off the explosion!"

Doriza came forward to where I had sagged back on the pillows. At sight of her smile, I thought no more of strife and wounds and worries.

THE RINGERS VISIT THE CASINO IN THE CRYSTAL SYSTEM



"DON'T PUT YOUR DOUGH IN THAT, PAL! IF YOU SHOULD HIT THE JACKPOT, HE RUNS LIKE THE DEVIL!!"

One Against The Stars

By VASELEOS GARSON

Earth's last hope against the vicious radio-plague. A gleaming ship racing to bring salvation back from Venus. And hidden on the ship a thirteenth man—a plague carrier whose touch brought screaming death.

Illustration by DOOLIN

THIS was it. Its slim bright shape was Earth's last hope.

What matter the sweat, the blood and the tears that had gone into each rivet, every plate? What matter the eyes blurred and dulled with plans, blueprints? What matter the cost.

This was it.

It was done.

They stood there—the riveters, the welders; the draughtsmen, the engineers; the mathematicians, the technicians—and there glowed in their eyes a living flame.

This was the ship of hope.

Its rockets flickered into blue flames. Their soft purr of power deepened. Abruptly, the earth was trembling to the throaty roar of rockets.

In its long steel-rollered cradle, the ship trembled.

One of the workers, his denim trousers grease-stained, bending down, scooped up a handful of the dust at his feet, flung it at the shining ship.

"Just for luck," he said.

In the glass bulge atop the shining ship, John Bairn, the pilot, licked feverish lips. He brushed the black hair away from his gray eyes. His stubby fingers raced over the keys of the control panel before him.

His right hand touched—almost reverently—the scarlet handle of the firing lever.

He pushed the lever forward one notch . . . two . . . three . . .

He braced himself in the hydraulic-cushioned pilot's chair.

"Venus, here we come!"

The rockets roared faintly even in this sound-proofed cubicle. Then the pounding blood in his ears washed out all other sound. The pounding in his ears grew throatier, louder.

The 9G acceleration blacked him out.

That dive was a little too steep, he was thinking, first time I ever blacked out with

somebody on my tail. He jerked his head around to see where the butcher was. And then he remembered.

He looked ahead. The stars were steady white flames in the black pool of space. Ah, there it was! The pale green flame that was Venus.

Somewhere, there, lay Earth's salvation.

Arlington Arden, the metal expert, came into the cubicle then, his blond face pale.

"Some shove, huh?" he opined.

Bairn nodded, his gray eyes watched the orientation chart whose red and green and yellow lights were flickering in the rhythm that showed they were on the mathematically-charted course.

"Think the stuff is really there, Arlie?" Bairn questioned.

"We're staking our lives on it, John."

"Yeah, and the lives of a billion like us. What if it isn't?"

"Venus' spectrum shows its presence. It's not an emanation that is easily duplicated. If it isn't, it's too much of a grim joke—because the money in this ship could have paid for a thousand experiments. My Mary's got a touch of blue coloring in her skin—the first symptom, y'know."

"Sorry," Bairn said, and his voice was soft.

"Beautiful," Arden said. "I hope Mary can see it sometime." He was looking out at space, his arms clasped behind him. "It's not like I thought, though—this being the first humans to see the stars away from earth." He stopped.

"It's so damn' big and beautiful it hurts," he said at last.

"Yeah, I know," Bairn put in. "It makes guys like us feel cheap and small."

"No!" The word was explosive. Bairn jerked around in the pilot's cradle and stared. Arden had a frown on his forehead.



Hell burst in the engine room,

"And who in blue blazes are you?" Bairn snapped.

"Joe," the big blocky youngster said, as if that explained everything.

"Joe, huh?" Bairn grunted. "How did you get on this ship?"

JOE'S brown eyes stared steadily at Bairn, and his big shoulders shrugged. "I stowed away." And then as the two stared blankly at him, he hurried on:

"I had to. Really. There's a legend in our family that a man named Joe will be the first to reach the stars. It was promised way back when. So I had to come. I had to!"

Bairn grunted again. "Isn't much we can do about it now, I guess. But you'll have to earn your way. What can you do?"

Joe grinned—a big grin that made Bairn and Arden smile.

He shrugged and grinned again. "I don't know. But I'll be good for something. You'll see."

"All right. Arlie, will you take him down to the rocket room? Maybe the gang can find something for him to do."

"Come on, Joe," Arden said.

Joe shook his head. "Not just yet," he answered. "I'd like to tell you something first." He pointed out toward the stars. "A minute ago, you said"—he nodded at Bairn—"this makes us feel cheap and small.

"You're wrong. You're just afraid. All this is man's—yours, mine, ours. It's just so darn big, we don't realize it. But this is our destiny—that's what the prophet said a long time ago. It took a disease like that sweeping the Earth now to get us here. But we're here. The stars are our destiny. No sense in being otherwise. No sense in feeling cheap and small." He stopped, looked at Bairn and Arden.

"Don't you feel it?" Joe asked. "This first time the Earth shackles are loosed? Don't you feel the power and understanding and strength the stars give you out here?"

"This is where I belong," Joe said. "Out here where you can see what you're reaching for. That's why I had to come." He stopped and a slow embarrassed flush crept over his face.

"See what I mean?"

Surprisingly, it was Bairn who answered:

"Thanks, kid, you're good for something all right. I don't know what it is about you, but you give a guy a sense of—peace, I guess you'd say."

"Belonging?" Arden put in. "That it, Johnny?"

"Yeah, that's it," Bairn said, and turned back to his orientation board. "So run along, kid."

Arlie Arden, leading the way down the circular staircase that went to the power room, said abruptly:

"You're no city man, are you, Joe? I've never seen cloth like that made in the cities. That tunic you're wearing looks like it's made up for the north forests."

"No," Joe answered shortly, "I'm not a city man. I'm a wooder." They left the stairway, moved along a tube passage.

"Not a member of that crazy cult that wants a back-to-the-forests movement?"

Joe's denial was quick, and Arden looked at him sharply. The stowaway was looking down at his toes as he walked on. Arden shrugged.

"Here," Arden said at last, stopping before a huge oval door that jutted from the tube. He twisted a wheel on the door, pushed the heavy portal open.

Arden watched the stowaway as he stepped into the power room. Joe stopped and his brown eyes lifted first, then dropped down to rest on the huge generators that were making the air pulse with vibration. Then his eyes moved to the huge dull-metal bulk that occupied the whole far end of the power room. His gaze took in the feeder pipe that evenly cleaved the huge bulk of the machine in half; the long neat rows of switches and valves that broke the austere front of the power plant.

Joe breathed deep once then turned questioning to Arden who was watching him.

"THAT'S what drives the ship, Joe," Arden said. "Reduced to its simple terms it's an atom smasher. Hidden deep within that bulky outfit lies a block of uranium, constantly bombarded with electrons made a trifle heavier by running up against a magnetic current operating at right angles to them. The resultant dis-

turbance of the uranium is harnessed and fed into the rocket tubes."

Arden glanced at Joe whose eyes were fixed on the feeder pipe.

"That's a funny thing, Joe, that pipe you're looking at."

"Why?"

"Through that pipe comes water."

"Water?"

Arden nodded. "For some reason that not even the technicians who worked on that plant know, microscopic jets of water have to be hurled into the chamber with the bombarding particles to cause proper power."

"Water?" Joe asked. "You drive this ship with water?"

Arden smiled. "Yes, water and the help—not negligible either—of uranium. It'll take exactly two hundred and twelve gallons of water to drive to Venus, and the same amount back—at least that's what Black Tom figures." Arden nodded to the huge dark-skinned, black-haired man in white coveralls who stood by an instrument panel, checking figures off on a clipboard he held.

"Come on, Joe," Arden said, heading for a ladder that was bolted to the wall at one side of the huge power room. Joe followed up the ladder, was on the heels of Arden as the metal expert crawled through a cubby-hole at the top.

"See?" Arden said straightening up. "Water."

Joe looked at the row of horizontal metal cylinders that stretched before him. The tops of them were a foot taller than his head, and he moved to the side, and counted aloud to eleven before Arden said:

"We might starve and go naked, but we'll never run out of catalyst or get thirsty," Arden opined. "Each of those tanks holds six hundred gallons and there're twenty-four of them."

Joe moved to the nearest of the tanks, rubbed his hands on the moist surfacing and commented absently:

"It feels like velvet."

Arden laughed a little. "Come on, Joe, I'll turn you over to Black Tom and he'll put you to work doing something. He never likes to see anyone idle."

They crawled out of the wall cubby and down the ladder. A second white-garbed man had joined the power room head and

they were talking together as Arden and Joe approached.

"That's Whitey Burnet," Arden said, and started, for Joe had halted dead in his tracks.

Black Tom Morrissey and Burnet turned then. Morrissey said, "Hello, Arlie," briefly and turned back to his gauge panel. Burnet stood rigid for a moment at the sight of Joe.

Then with three quick strides Burnet was at Joe. He said softly.

"Damn you, Joe." And lashed out with a hard fist. The blow caught Joe on the cheek, cutting the skin, and staggering him momentarily.

Joe started to swing his browned fist up, then slowly he lowered it. He looked at Burnet with quiet brown eyes.

"I can't hit you, Paul. You know that."

Paul's face was white. "No," he said, and he was almost bitter. "I know that." Then he turned his back on Joe and walked away.

Arden's blue eyes watched the by-play, observed:

"Whitey doesn't like you very much, huh?"

Joe's brown eyes were dull looking as he pulled his gaze from Burnett's retreating back and looked at Arden.

"No," he said, and his voice was flat. "Paul doesn't like me much." With an effort he smiled, added: "Shall we find out what I can do?"

Arden nodded. . . .

Joe Wilding met the rest of the crew at the arbitrary meal that was termed supper.

JOE came in behind Arden, and unobtrusively slid to one side of the door, and watched the men around the table laughing and joking.

Arden said:

"Fellas, I'd like you to meet a new crew member."

The laughing and joking stopped, and the eyes of eleven men measured Joe Wilding. Black Tom winked at Joe and went back to his eating. Whitey Burnet, after a brief angry glance, turned back to his plate.

Arden added: "His name is Joe Wilding."

The others at the table smiled, nodded or spoke according to their habits—except

one, a nervous redhead, who stared at Joe.

Then he looked around at the others at the table. He was a little apologetic.

The redhead said: "I know this guy. I piloted the ship that took him to the Rock for sedition. I don't think we want him on the ship. He's one of those wild ones who tried to kidnap the president."

Arden grunted: "I thought so."

Burnet, his normally ruddy face white, reared to his feet:

"No!" he shouted. "You're wrong, Herd. He was pardoned. I know. They found he had nothing to do with the kidnapping."

"Maybe so," Charlie Herd, assistant pilot said, still apologetically. "But I know I took him to the Rock—and I didn't hear anything after that about him. But he's the same guy."

"He was a wild one," Herd said almost dreamily. "He knocked out two of the guards, grabbed one of the chutes and was almost out of the ship before I rolled the crate over and bashed him against the cabin wall."

Whitey Burnet's face was still white. "Look," he said. "I don't like Joe, but it's something personal. The tribunal found him innocent, so why not give him a chance?"

Arden turned to Joe who still stood by the side of the door, his handsome bronzed face stiff.

"Well?" Arden asked.

Joe smiled. He said, looking at the red-headed Herd:

"You're right as far as you went. I was taken to the Rock. I did try to break loose. The tribunal found me not guilty and apologized. I was released. And here I am."

Herd looked back at Joe, and then he smiled, half-apologetically:

"I'll take you at face value. You look all right."

"Thanks," Joe said.

Bob and Ronnie Guetschow, the bulky professor twins, broke the ensuing silence with:

"Come on and eat." The ice broke silently. Arden motioned Joe toward an empty chair at the table. Joe moved forward, then stopped as his eyes counted the men at the table.

"Sit down, Joe," Arden grunted, pick-

ing himself a convenient, padded chair.

Surprisingly, Joe shook his head. "No," he said, and for the first time he looked embarrassed. There was a slight flush under his tan.

The table talk stopped again. George Keating, the thin, wiry electrical engineer, said half-jokingly:

"Afraid you'll get contaminated?"

Joe's tan skin lost its red of embarrassment, twisted strangely.

"Sorry," put in Keating hastily. "Only joking."

Joe swallowed. Then: "I'm just superstitious, I guess." The words rushed out. "If I sit down, that'll make thirteen."

ED PARMAN, black-haired assistant to Black Tom, jumped hastily to his feet. "Good gravy, he's right. You sit down, Joe, I'll finish my pudding in the corner."

Joe said: "Sit down. I'm used to discomfort. I'm a wooder." He grinned. Parman grinned back, started in on his pudding.

Joe, the men were to notice in the coming days, seemed to make a point of never eating with the bunch after that. But he did it so smoothly, it wasn't offensive. . . .

Venus, in the days that followed, grew from a tiny yellow-green flame, that Bairn, the pilot, had noticed in the first hours of the flight, to a white globe, just hinting a tint of blue, that began to fill the heavens before him.

Joe, on an off hour from the power room, sat quietly in the co-pilot's chair, drinking in the planet. He and Bairn, usually so taciturn, had talked much in the days of the flight.

This day, when Joe came in, Bairn looked at him with a strange twist to his mouth. He said nothing for quite a while, the two just sitting there, Joe looking up and ahead, Bairn, apparently preoccupied with figures on his charts.

Finally Bairn said:

"Has Arden said anything to you?"

Joe shook his head. "No," he said. "Why?"

Bairn, apparently speaking absent-mindedly, said:

"Arle's wife, Mary, has the radio disease. She's in the first stage. Has the blue coloring. It means everything to

Arlie that this ship gets to Venus and back. Venus has the only radio-active static compound that matches the stuff from the meteorite."

"Yes," Joe said. "I know. It was only luck that scientist, Struthers, had that meteorite in the room with him when he had the disease. It cured him. And then scientists and astronomers searched star spectrums to find a match for the color scheme that they found in the meteorite metal."

"This ship," Bairn put in, "cost billions; it meant the first real cooperative program the world's nations ever had. It would be ghastly if one man caused the destruction of Earth's last hope from doom. Wouldn't it, Joe?"

Joe's face was grim as he nodded.

"How would you feel if you were to blame for drowning out humanity, Joe?"

Joe stood up, and his body was shaking.

"Tell me, Joe," Bairn said quietly. "Why have you kept yourself from eating with the rest of the guys? Why is it when you come here you're always smelling of antiseptic?"

There were tears in Joe's brown eyes when he faced Bairn.

"Okay, John, What shall I do?"

"There's not much harm done yet? Arlie says that in the first stages, it's only communicable by contact. But once it gets past that first stage, it goes hog wild."

"Tell me, Joe, when did the nauseous attacks first come?"

Joe's brown eyes were dead. "Two days before the ship left."

"You were willing to sacrifice mankind just to see the stars yourself, Joe?"

It was Arlie Arden who came in quietly, then.

"No," said Joe, and then he looked at the two of them.

"Believe me," he said, and his voice was deep, vibrant. "I was drawn to the ship by a power greater than any of us. I knew the terrible gamble. For if this ship crashes before it gets back to Earth with that Venus ore, it means the end of man."

"I knew that. Everything my mind said pointed out the consequences. My mind said no in every possible way. But . . . my mind had no chance against the impulse that drove me aboard ship."

"Somehow I know that my presence on board this ship means the salvation of mankind. . . ." He shook his head at Arden whose lips were pursed to speak.

"It's not egotism or some crack-brained idea. I couldn't rest until I was aboard ship. I'm chosen to do something to preserve mankind, not destroy it. It's just as if something bigger than me or you or the universe had taken hold of me, placed me here."

Arden said: "Do you know what we're going to do to you, Joe?"

Joe looked at him steadily as Arden drew a gun from his pocket. "We're going to kill you and throw you out in space. It's the only way to keep you from contaminating the rest of us."

Joe said: "You can't." Simply, he said it.

Bairn said quietly. "We will, Joe."

Arden lipiped: "Do you think we can value one life against Earth's billions? This is the ship of hope, Joe. This is Earth's last chance. If we fail, it's the end. For once the disease starts, there is no stopping it."

He leveled the automatic. "Good-bye, Joe."

JOE'S BODY slumped, almost in weakness. Then he galvanized into a human whirlwind. The gun cracked but Joe was not there. He'd spun quickly, diving for the cubicle door, flinging a chart as he fled. The flying chart disturbed Arden's aim. The gun blasted, and Joe felt the wind of the bullet fanning his cheek.

Then Joe was in the sloping passageway, sliding down the ramp. He heard the crack and the banshee wail as another bullet struck the duralloy wall and ricocheted.

He hurled his body toward the branch passage that led toward the power room, and then a communications speaker ahead of him cried out, bringing Arden's voice from the pilot's cubicle:

"Kill Joe Wilding—but for your life don't touch him!"

Joe stopped running abruptly then.

He was trapped, for that communications system had outlets all over the ship, and it wouldn't do to advertise his presence by running. Only the stealth he'd learned in his years of wooding could help him now.

But what good was all his wood training in this huge hulk of shining metal? No chance for camouflage, no chance to dive into a creek and swim away so that your spoor could be lost in the swirling water.

And then Joe smiled and began to run softly. He had a place to hide if he could make it. The quick pat of hurrying steps stopped him short and his quick mind hurled his body to the side of the passage and asprawl on the floor where the lights cast a shadow.

It was Paul Burnet hurrying up the passage, the light glinting on the butt of the automatic belted at his waist. Only for an instant did Burnet hesitate, then he ran on. His voice drifted back softly:

"I'm giving *you* another chance. We're even now, Joe."

Joe rose to his feet and hurried on to the power room. Joe halted, breathing deeply. Black Tom would be too interested in his charts to hear what little sound he might make.

At the huge oval door leading into the power room. Joe halted, breathing deeply. Then, quietly, easily, he swung open the heavy door, stepped inside, his eyes searching for Black Tom.

Softly, he pulled the portal closed, stood there breathing in long, quiet breaths. Then he moved across the huge power room, feet moving as cautiously as if he were stalking a deer in the autumn woods.

Black Tom's head was bent over a report sheet, his fingers were busy with a pencil. He shook his head, and Joe was motionless. Then a chuckle came from Black Tom's lips, and under cover of the sound, Joe made for the ladder leading to the water compartment.

Black Tom's head lifted as if startled; his head began to turn toward the exit door. Joe went up the ladder like a frightened monkey, fairly blasted himself through the cubbyhole at the top and then rolled quietly inside.

He lay there, his heart pounding with the quick exertion as he heard Black Tom's footsteps moving across the floor. He held his breath; Black Tom's grunt of puzzlement came muted to his ears. The footsteps returned to the chart table, and Joe risked a look to see Black Tom's head once more bent in study.

Joe lifted himself to his feet, went over

and touched the wet surface of the first of the water cylinders reverently. He walked on down the line, patting each of the huge tanks till he had reached the last.

His arms reached up, his hands gripped the top of the cylinder and the sinewy muscles in his back and arms lifted himself to the top of it. Then he slid down from the top into the wedge shaped space between the circumference of the tank and the bulwark of the wall.

This was sanctuary, Joe thought. Like a cave in the forest when the wolf-pack keened out their howls for your blood. Only different. For it was your friends who wanted to kill you.

In the darkness, Joe's teeth gleamed in a quick smile.

Then Joe fell asleep.

ARDEN was weary when he met John Bairn coming down from his time of duty in the pilot cubicle.

"He's gone," Arden said. "Just as if he had stepped out into space. Now we're worse off than ever."

Bairn nodded, said: "I get it. If he's on this ship, he'll have to come in for food; we won't know what he's touched. Maybe one of the more susceptible among us with a scratch may touch something he had and won't know. The infected one will pass like the touch of death among us."

Arden said: "Everything we know he might have touched has been destroyed or disinfected, but there may have been something we missed. Damn him!" Arden's voice was flat, hopeless.

"It's hard to imagine Joe as the destroyer he is. I talked to him by the hour. I liked him; and even now, when I know what a potential of death he is—that's what makes me so damn mad."

"Tomorrow," Arden said abruptly. "Tomorrow we'll know if this cruise is in vain."

Bairn amended it: "Tomorrow, we land on Venus; if the stuff's there, okay. If it isn't, we won't have to worry about Joe Wilding any more."

JOE didn't know what time it was when it happened. But he knew the first leg of the journey was over.

That steady thrumming of the motors that had worked its way into his body so

that it had become a part of him drew away gradually and left a sense of emptiness behind.

Joe climbed down from his hiding place, flexed his cramped muscles and stood erect. He faced the wall, the blank duralloy steel wall and stared as if his eyes could pierce the opaqueness and look out upon Venus.

He stood there a long time, his hands clenched into hard fists at his side, bright-eyed and staring.

"God!" he whispered.

How did it look out there on Venus—on that planet when this first earth ship landed? Was it like Earth—friendly, familiar? Or inimical, alien?

If he came out now, he could see it with his own wondering eyes—and die. If he stayed here, he might never see it. But his mission was not fulfilled. Somehow, quite clearly, he realized that.

So Joe crawled back into his metal cave, into the darkness.

The only sound in the quiet water compartment was a muffled sobbing.

ARDEN it was who closed the heavy door to the chamber.

"That's it," he said, and his voice was a caress. "There's enough of it in that lead-lined vault to rid the world. It's up to you, John, to take us safely home."

Some one of the men said: "How about Wilding?"

A hush came to the room, a silence tight and somehow menacing.

Arden's voice was harsh: "He can't hurt us now. We have the metal to cure us if he should contaminate us."

Whitey Burnet said: "Why not cure him?"

"No," said Arden. "I have the key to the vault. If one of us is infected, I'll open it and treat him. But Joe Wilding deserves to die. It wasn't his fault that we are still uninfected. He was willing to destroy the Earth in order to be here. That threat is gone now, but he must suffer."

"Archie," Bairn said softly. "Would Mary want you to let Joe Wilding die?"

Arden spoke coldly: "Did Wilding care about Mary when he stowed away on this ship?"

Bairn had no answer.

JOE WILDING was restless. Even the fiery fever that racked him could not quiet him. He paced the long water compartment, legs weary but restless. He couldn't stand it here much longer; he had to get out into the light, out where he could move and see and feel something besides the dampness dripping upon him, the quick mutter of the pumps as they drove the catalyst to the firing chambers.

He walked to the cubbyhole, looked down into the power room.

Whitey Burnet was there, alone.

Impulsively, Joe Wilding climbed out of the cubby hole and down the ladder.

"Paul," he said softly. "I'm hungry."

Paul Burnet turned slowly.

"Hello, Joe."

They stood there, the two of them. Whitey Burnet, immaculate in his white work clothes; Joe Wilding, a heavy growth of beard on his face, his tunic dirtied, his hair matted.

"I gave you your chance, Joe. Just as you gave me mine. We're even."

Burnet turned to the communications phone, then turned back suddenly.

"Now you know, Joe. Now you know how I felt. You know how it is to be hunted, to be afraid of your own shadow, to know what a despicable creature you are. To be followed by a fear that freezes your guts—"

"But I'm not afraid, Paul. I'm just hungry, and tired of being alone."

"I was alone, Joe."

"No, Paul, you weren't alone, ever. Carol's thoughts were ever of you. I hunted you the world over; but you always ran away. You never would give me a chance. And Carol's letters always came back marked: 'No such person at this address.'"

Paul's voice was almost mocking: "Even now you act the gentleman, pretending. I hate your guts, Joe Wilding. But for you, Carol and I would have been married long ago. I liked you once, Joe Wilding, I even thought what a wonderful brother-in-law you'd make. Even now, I find myself liking you a little bit—but God knows I don't know why."

"You'd better call them, Whitey," Joe said.

"No, not yet. You saved my life when you dragged me away that day my kidnaper

plan failed. You carried me, fractured skull and all, away from the greatest chance a man ever had to make this a real world. If we had got the president we could have forced the wildwood doctrine down the people's throats."

Joe shook his head. "The people won't take forced medicine. They must have sugar-coated pills to cure them and lead them right."

Whitey cut in: "Then you made me promise I'd quit. And you told Carol of my plot, and she wouldn't look me in the face when I came."

"She cried her eyes out when you left. She asked me to find you and bring you back. But you wouldn't listen." Then, softly, "She's still waiting, Paul. Waiting for you."

Paul stood tensely, his eyes searching Joe's bearded face. The atomic motor thrummed quietly.

"You'd better call them, Paul."

Whitey jumped unexpectedly, as the shrill keening of the danger siren suddenly keened into the power room. Bairn's voice cracked through the speaker:

"Grab something, guys. A meteor, and we can't dodge!"

Like an exclamation point to his words came the heeling crash.

JOE and Paul were flung to the floor as the ship rocked and heaved. The lights went out, the motors suddenly cut off. There was a shuddering scream as metal tore; the air turned hot and dry.

The ship kept rocking as if caught in a great stormy sea. Rolling on the floor, Joe heard a deep roar that was beginning to grow shrill.

A warning bell was ringing in his head; then he realized it was the bell signaling escaping air. Then he was on his feet, holding himself against the heeling motion of the ship, crying out:

"Paul, where are you? Paul, Paul, Paul. . . ."

"Here," Whitey's voice was weak, but Joe followed it. He found Paul, heaved him to his shoulders and staggered away toward a wall. It was the wall to the passageway he decided dully and felt along it until he found the door. It opened easily as if pushed by a giant hand. He struggled hard to get across the threshold

against the pushing air. He made it, dropped Paul to the passageway. Then he tugged desperately against the pull of the air against the door as he dragged it shut. Somehow, he got it closed, twisted the locking lever.

He sat down against the wall of the passage and breathed in long, shallow breaths.

In the darkness, he heard Paul's voice: "Did you mean that about Carol," Paul asked, and his heart was in it.

"Yes," said Joe. "She's still waiting for you to come back to her."

It was quiet there for a moment, with only the muted ringing of the bell from the power room seeping through the wall.

Joe said: "Did I hurt you when I dropped you, Paul?"

"Not much," Burnet answered. "My head's a little dizzy, but it takes more than an easy jar like that to make it dangerous. Forget it."

"But how did you get through the physical for the trip? The metal plate in your skull should have barred you."

"I'm one of the few who know what the power plant here is like, remember? Besides, the physical wasn't too steep. And Joe, I'm sorry I was such a heel to sock you when you couldn't hit me back. You'd have killed with the blow."

"I know," said Joe. He heard Paul breathing in harsh gasps.

"Paul," he said anxiously.

"It's all right."

"But it isn't! Here, I'll carry you to the first aid room." Joe got up, lifted Paul to his shoulders.

Joe had carried Paul perhaps a hundred feet when lights flickering on the walls and the sound of footsteps signaled the advance of the others.

"So," came Arden's voice as the beam from a flashlight centered on Joe's face, "the rat came out of his hole."

After the blackness, the light hurt Joe's eyes and he lowered his head.

Arden came forward quickly, slapped Joe openhanded across the mouth. "I've waited a long time for this!" He slapped him again, and Joe felt the blood trickling from his lips.

Joe lowered Paul Burnet easily to the floor. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand, said:

"You don't understand. I'm bringing Paul, he's hurt. His skull was fractured a long time ago, and it's reacting." He knelt beside Burnet, took the hurt man's wrist. "How are you now, Paul?"

Burnet smiled weakly: "A little better."

Arden kicked Joe aside: "Keep your diseased hands off him, traitor."

Joe got wearily to his feet. "Arden," he said, "Bairn told me how upset you are about your wife. That's why I excused those slaps. But this—"

Joe's right arm drew back swiftly, drove his doubled fist to Arden's jaw. Arden dropped as if the floor had fallen from under him.

"That tears it, Joe," Bairn said. "I'm sorry, Joe. But we have no recourse but to lock you up. You're a walking plague, and socking Arden was the last straw."

From the floor, Burnet said weakly: "But Arden had it coming. . . ."

"We can't be the judge of that. Joe is worth no consideration now. Don, lock Joe up in one of the empty storage rooms, but don't get near him."

"Right," said Timnson, the mathematician. "Come on, Wilding."

Joe started to move away, stopped and said:

"See that one of the twins looks after Paul, will you?"

"Go on," said Bairn. Joe went ahead of Timnson.

THE HEAVY door clanged shut behind Joe, and he was alone in the darkness. The motors were still silent, and he wondered how much damage the meteorite had done to the ship. He felt his way to the communications phone, unhooked it. But the steady hum that signified that it was alive was absent. Even the call speaker gave no sound.

Wearied, Joe sat down against the wall, and despite the hunger feeling throbbing in his stomach fell asleep.

It was the overhead light shining into his eyes that awakened him. His ears sought for the sound of the motors, no familiar thrum. The wandering meteor must have done quite a bit of damage.

The communications phone buzzed. Joe answered.

8—Planet—Summer.

"Hello, Joe," it was Burnet's voice.

"How are you, Paul? The dizziness gone?"

"Right, but I guess it doesn't do any good. We're not going anywhere." Burnet's voice was a little strained.

"Why?" put in Joe.

"That damn meteor knocked hell out of the rear blasting tubes, and some of the fellows are outside trying to replace the busted ones. But even if they get it fixed we're still derelict. That meteor took all of our water, and I guess you know what that means."

Joe was silent. Then: "No catalyst, no move, is that it, Paul?"

"Uh huh," Paul answered, "No H-2-O, no go."

"The cans," Joe said, abruptly.

"Cans?" Paul questioned over the wire.

"Sure," said Joe, and he was breathless as he hurried on. "Paul, all that canned food. There's water in them. And there must be some water left in the pipes to the kitchen and the lav? Have they thought of that?"

"Yes," said Paul. "The pipes, I mean, not the cans. Arden and Bairn are having the pipes pumped out now, Doc Guetschow tells me. But I'll pass along the can suggestion."

"Was it really bad?" Joe asked.

"Sure, they got the power room sealed again. But that water compartment was mashed to junk, and the water just went pfft! It's a good thing you got out there when you did, or you'd have been pfft! too. I'll ring you back with any later developments."

Joe pronged the receiver. He began to pace the room. He couldn't stay in here. There must be something he could do out there. But this room was better than any prison. His eyes searched the room.

Joe's eyes were sparkling all of a sudden. Bless the planners who laid out this ship!

He broke the heavy crowbar from the emergency wall chest. He twisted the heavy steel in the locking mechanism on the inner panel of the door. Bracing his feet against the door and drawing the heavy bar toward him, he strained desperately.

He knew from his meandering around

the ship that the locking device was only to insure the doors would not open accidentally. The muscles in his back and shoulders bulged so that the tunic he wore split down the back.

He tugged until his muscles quivered with the strain. He should break loose now so he could open the door from the inside.

But nothing happened,

JOE relaxed, stood back and wiped the sweat from his brow; the lack of food had weakened him. The locking mechanism should have given way.

Once more he inserted the bar in the device. Once more he called on his wood-trained muscles. He tried desperately this time, exerting all the strength he could summon. Blackness threatened to engulf.

Then as if in a dream, he heard the muffled cling! That meant the device had snapped. He fell to the floor, his breath coming in sobs. Then he quieted, lifted his body up, and twisted the wheel. It turned easily, and the door pulled open at his tug.

He came out into the passageway to face Arden, gun drawn.

Arden cursed softly: "Won't you stay put, Joe?"

Joe shrugged. "You need me," he said. "Need you?" repeated Arden. "Need you to infect us so we can't get the ship going again."

Joe watched Arden, then he said: "Arden, why not cure me; then I won't be dangerous and I can help?"

"No." Arden's voice was flat. "I'm the only man on ship who knows how to give the treatment, and you're not getting any. Your life is forfeit for what you almost managed to do."

"You won't stop me, now, Arden," Joe said. "You can barely see me now, and you're trying so hard to keep from vomiting out your guts. You've got the radio disease; why don't you cure yourself?"

Joe moved back slowly; Arden's gun followed him hesitantly.

"You," Arden said. "You did it. You gave it to me." The gun steadied.

"No," Joe said. "You had it before I ever came aboard ship. But you didn't know it, did you, Arden? You're a car-

rier, and you came to the ship straight from your wife."

Arden shook his head weakly. "I took the usual tests; it showed me free of it."

"But you know the usual tests, Arden; you know you can't tell for sure until you get the nausea. And it acts at varying speeds with different people, doesn't it?"

Arden's fingers whitened on the gun; and Joe leapt aside suddenly. The shot blasted out. Then the gun dropped from Arden's fingers and he fell forward on his face, retching.

Joe lifted the fallen metal expert almost tenderly, and carried him toward the hospital room.

When he brought his burden in, Joe saw Burnet sitting on the edge of the bed, slipping on his sandals. Doc Guetschow, one of the professor twins, was remonstrating with him, trying to keep him in bed.

Burnet shook himself free and stood up. Then he saw Joe placing Arden's body on the bed.

"Well!"

Joe turned and smiled. Then he was serious: "Arden's got the radio disease." "Your fault, Joe," Burnet said. "He was right."

"No," Joe said doggedly. "He had it when he came aboard, too. He's got it bad, too. See what you can do for him, Doc."

Then Joe trotted out of the hospital room, and headed for the kitchen store-rooms. Wick Wilson, who doubled as cook and metallurgist, was opening cans and draining off the liquid into a tub.

"Help?" asked Joe.

Wick Wilson looked at Joe briefly, said: "I thought you were in the brig." Then, "Sure, lug the tub down to the power room. We're trying to get enough water out of the juice to make catalyst."

Joe hoisted the tub to one shoulder. "How about something to eat?"

Wick went into the kitchen, pulled a half chicken out of the refrigerator, brought back.

"Southern fried," he said. "It'll hold you together."

Joe bit off a chunk and carried the rest in one hand as he balanced the tub of fruit and vegetable juices on one shoulder and strode from the room.

BLACK TOM was putting the finishing touches on a metal cylinder he had salvaged from some of the shattered tanks.

As Joe came in the power room door, Black Tom asked: "How does it look? Been a long time since I did any welding, but it'll hold water."

Black Tom and Herd, the assistant pilot, had bolted the jury rigged tank to the floor, and had, through some amateur plumbing work, hooked up a pipe system to the atomic motor.

Joe jerked his chicken-filled hand at the tub on his shoulder.

"Where does this juice go?"

Morrissey apparently had just realized that Joe was free. He looked at him blankly for a moment.

"Dump it in the tank," he said, pointing to the metal ladder leaning against the tank. "But keep your distance," he added. "We don't want to catch the plague."

Joe grinned, stuffed the remainder of the chicken in his mouth, carried the tub up the ladder, and dumped the conglomerated juices into the circular opening at the top of the tank.

Joe came down the ladder.

"Got enough yet?" he questioned.

"Hell, no," exploded Black Tom. "Look at the gauge we rigged up. Here."

Joe looked at the gauge affixed to the side of the tank. It was about two inches below a chalk line Black Tom had drawn.

"The white line marks the absolute minimum of water we need to get the ship within gravitational pull of the Earth; from there in it's up to our extensor vanes."

"How much do you need yet?" Joe asked.

Black Tom grunted. "About twelve gallons—and if those juices run out, we'll have to do some wholesale lemon and orange squeezing."

Joe started to turn.

Black Tom said: "Thanks, Joe, for the can suggestion. It may pull us through."

Joe nodded, went up with his tub for another load of juice.

When he had dumped the second load in, he said:

"Wick's got Whitey, Ronnie Guetschow and Keating squeezing lemons. This is the last of the loose juice." He shook his head to clear his mind, said briefly, "Ex-

cuse me," and hurriedly left the power room.

When he came back, his face pale, his limbs shaking from the retching stomach, Bairn and Ed Parman were talking to Black Tom.

BAIRN looked serious. "Hell," he said. "It would boil down to that. The motor's okay, Ed says. But I don't know where in blue blazes we're going to get enough water. Timson's got the hydraulic press from the workroom rigged up squeezing out the garbage we didn't dump."

He turned to Black Tom: "You're sure your sand filter will take all the solids out, so it won't plug up the water jets?"

Black Tom nodded. It was then Bairn noticed Joe.

Bairn said wearily: "Haven't you caused enough grief, Joe? Arden's sick with the disease because of you. You've been a jinx ever since the trip started. Why don't you crawl in a hole and die?"

"I'm trying to help," Joe said.

"Nuts," said Bairn tiredly. Then he turned to Black Tom. "We've got gasoline galore for operating the electrical units. Think gas'll work?"

"No," Tom said briefly. Joe's stomach was beginning to quiver again, and the figures of Tom, Bairn and Parman were weaving. He could feel his pulses pounding raggedly, as if a million drummers were anxious to keep out of tempo.

He forced himself to walk slowly from the room, but the dizziness caught him at the door and he had to hang on to the lever to keep from keeling over.

His thoughts were kaleidoscoping, but one finally broke through clearly. It was the answer.

He pulled himself erect, said through feverish lips:

"Bairn. . . ."

Bairn said, without turning his head:

"Beat it, Joe!"

"Please, John," Joe said, "I know where to get more water." He staggered toward the three men, the floor rocking under him. He felt his mind shouting the words, but his desperate mind couldn't make his lips move. His eyes wouldn't focus; his legs wouldn't work.

He only half-felt the hurt as his head struck the power room floor.

"Good," said Bairn, almost pleased. "That's taking care of him. Parman, shove him over in the corner. Better put these rubber gloves on."

It was a good three hours later when Bairn and Black Tom stood at the gauge measuring the height of the water in the tank.

"Not good enough," Black Tom said. "If we don't crash on the moon, we'll end up as a satellite. That's all the water we can squeeze out of it."

"Damn," breathed Bairn, "another gallon would take us home. But there isn't another lick of water on the ship." He checked off on his fingers: "The lav, the connecting pipes, the canned food, the garbage, the storage batteries, that does it, guys, I guess."

The others stood quietly. Bairn went on: "We might as well get going. Maybe, the fruit juice has got more umph to it than the water, and we might coast in. But Black Tom says we've got enough to reach the moon's orbit track, but not enough to reach the gravity pull of the Earth.

"We've done all we can," he said. "Now it's up to whatever providence watches over people like us." He licked dry lips and smiled.

THE MUTED thrumming of the atomic motor gradually worked its way into Joe's consciousness. He moved wearily, and then his mind, short-circuited by the ravages of the fever, cleared itself and he became aware of his surroundings.

How long he'd lain there, Joe couldn't tell as he staggered to his feet and toward the door. He had the answer, if he could make Bairn listen.

His glazed eyes stared around the power room. There was no one there. He weaved toward the water gauge, stared at it for a long time before it registered.

Why, his mind said dully, the tank's almost empty. Joe staggered for the door. The door was a ton weight that fought against him to open it. When it finally opened, he left it that way.

He got outside in the passageway, and his stomach rebelled. He was very sick for many moments. He crawled and staggered up the circular stairway toward the pilot's cubicle.

His body was bruised and hurting from the many times his weak legs had betrayed him before he reached the door to the cubicle. He couldn't move the lever to the door.

He tried to shout, but his voice was hoarse, weak. He pounded with both hands against the thick metal. But there was no answer. Once again, he was sick.

Then wearily he retraced his footsteps, pounded lengthily on each door with his weakened muscles. They couldn't hear him, a bitter voice nagged at him. He had the answer, and they wouldn't listen.

He didn't feel the pain as he rolled down the circular steps and lay at the bottom in a heap. Somehow he moved on, crawling.

If they couldn't listen, he'd have to do it. He reached the door to the power room, lifted his body across the threshold, and then weakness held him motionless.

Was this it, his heart questioned. This was what he had to do before the radio disease got him, wasn't it. He couldn't see, he couldn't hear, he couldn't feel. Oh, God, he couldn't even think.

Was this it? his heart asked again. Whatever the answer, it was somehow adequate . . . for Joe's body, weakened by the life-sucking plague moved slowly . . . so very slowly. . . .

"WE'VE nearly reached the last of the catalyst, if Black Tom's figures are right," Bairn said to the men crowded into the pilot's cubby.

"There's Earth," Parman said, and his voice was a caress.

The whole crew was there in the cubby, save for Arden and Burnet and the medical Guetschow twin. Doc Guetschow was down in sick bay with the other two, Burnet's head having started to act up again after three days without water.

"Tom, you're sure your figures are right?" the other Guetschow twin asked.

"Much as I hate to say it, yes. Only a few hundred miles and we're finished." Tom licked his puffed lips.

It was quiet there in the cubby as the atomic motor drove the ship at tremendous speed through the void.

"Can't we coast in?" Parman asked. "We've got tremendous acceleration."

"But not enough," Bairn said, "with the moon's gravitation field to reckon with."

All their hearts must have stopped then, when the steady thrum became a staccato beat. "This is it," Bairn said. The staccato turned to a broken rhythm, hesitated, and finally halted.

"God," said Herd, the co-pilot apologetically, "if the moon weren't around to hold us back."

But it was there, looming huge and ugly off the starboard side.

Parman said: "I can feel it pulling."

The strain made two or three of them giggle. Bairn said as if to a naughty child: "It isn't that strong, Ed."

Bairn's hand moved to click off the firing lever when the motors suddenly broke into thrumming life.

The inertia of new flight came to the ship again.

THEY made a frozen tableau, those men standing in the pilot's cubby.

Ed Parman was the first to break the tableau. He slumped to the floor, and lay there, his shoulders shaking convulsively.

"Herd," Bairn said suddenly, "Take over. Come on, Tom. Whatever did this is in the power room."

"Joe?" Herd asked.

"I don't know."

The two of them fled, leaving behind them, Parman on his knees staring at the void, the others half-crying, half-laughing.

Bairn and Black Tom Morrissey came into the power room. They stood awed at what they saw.

Joe was there.

Bairn said finally, voice as soft as the night wind over earth:

"Joe was right. He was good for something after all."

Tenderly, he and Black Tom lifted Joe's dead body down from the tank, laid him gently on the floor.

"The only thing we forgot, Tom," Bairn said. "*Blood.*"

Crimson still oozed slowly from Joe Wilding's cut wrists. There was a smile on his dead lips. For it was a man named Joe who was the first to reach the stars—and the roaring rockets had scattered his eternal life across the star trails.

Ex-champ Barney Hoyt found what makes the Navy click . . .



PIG-BOAT PUNCH

by JACKSON V. SCHOLZ

Her kiss was flame, her gun was doom—

SENORITA SCORPION

by LES SAVAGE JR.

Undersea, the U-boats; under cover, a deadly flying spy . . .

HAWK of the CARIBBEES

By O. B. MYERS

Craig McMillan, range drifter, had a man to kill—

THE PEACE MAKER

by WILLIAM HEUMAN

Monkey-men inundated the jungle, and a killer paced them.

BURMA ROGUE

by B. L. SHURTLEFF

and other complete yarns by a galaxy of ace writers in

ACTION STORIES

At your favorite newsstand



THE VIZIGRAPH

Summer, and the Interplanetary cracker barrel meeting society is now in session again. New Vizifanners, old Vizifanners, here are some of the men and women who contribute to PLANET STORIES. We hope you find new thoughts, or amusement, or get a bit angry—for this is your department, and we'd like to have your letters, too.

We feel lucky in many ways that we are still able to publish PLANET STORIES, for the paper shortage is acute, and many books are being dropped from schedules as the months roll by. We want to thank you for your continued support of this magazine, and promise to bring you as many fine stories as is in our power to purchase. Many authors and artists are serving in the armed forces, so our choice of scripts and illustrations is limited—but somehow we don't mind so much, if by losing those men and women momentarily, there comes a time when all books and magazines are free to print what they wish, with no suppressions of any kind.

So drop us your letters, airing your opinions, or wishes, or demands. We'll cooperate to the best of our abilities in furnishing you what you want. This is your magazine and your department; without your support neither would be possible. And why not double your bond purchases now! By doing that, you'll hasten the end of World War II. That is a goal beside which all others pale. Some day, there will be no rationing or privations—and you can buy that future now, simply by loaning your money to your country. And when that future comes, you'll have the magazines filled with the writings and drawings of your favorite authors and artists. You'll have a better world. Buy bonds—or wear them! It's up to you.

The winners of illustrations from the Winter PLANET STORIES are: 1—Joe Kennedy, 2—Bill Watson, 3—June Harris.

O BUT G!

2258 Nicholas Ave.,
Fresno, 2, California

DEAR EDITOR:

Since I did make "print" in a number of SF magazines, with those 1st-letters-of-an-old-fan of last January, and PLANET (and Vizigraph) have a special place in my mind and heart, I write again. [Excuse the German-grammar formation of the above: I live with Russian Germans all around me; but they call Hitler "*Der Verschlingener des Lebens*" (The Devourer of Life)—so they're O.K.].

I, like many of the authors and Vizifanners of P. S., have tried (futilely in my case—Guy Gifford, et al) to get into the uniformed, armed services of the U. S. Personally, because of special training, I came near getting a Lieutenant's commission in the Medical Corps of the Army—being approved in all ways except health rating. That places me, somewhat, in the minds of you-uns-all . . . Vizifan Gene Hunter (in another SF maga-

zine) placed me differently: He said "Kinkade is rather Opinionated but Good," about one of those 1st-letters.

1. *Prey of the Space Falcon* (Hey, Hunter—Old Space Falcon): A genuine SF tale with pleasing verisimilitude, a bit of love interest and an indirect blow for Democracy. A good Leidenfrost picture with it; but he forgot the leg-soak tanks of the Venusians at the bar. . . . Comps. to W. S. P.

2. *Message from Mars* by Simak: Super-intelligent lilies! Intriguing idea to me—who have lilies (of Terra) all over my place! Nevertheless when Space travel really starts, this tale may be life-like still. . . . Say! How about a Time Capsule, full of modern SF magazines?!

3. *Mutiny in the Void* by Tanner: Sodium perborate, eh, for oxygen? Dig into chemistry and Materia Medica for more ideas, Tanner. How about Butyl Mercaptan (imitation skunk odor) for making Japs, or Pirates of the Void, smell like what they are?

4. *Thralls of the Endless Night* by Brackett: I'll save space and quote from its last paragraph: "Who wants talk?" . . . Not O.-B.-G. Kinkade! Not while she writes, and I can still read, tales as good as this. . . . Good pic, too. I'm curious as to what Jay Chidsay says of this tale.

5. "P. S.'s Feature Flash": Confused linguist (and Vizifan) Conover acquits himself pleasingly therein. Night school, almost daily, eh? That's how I learned Spanish myself—before I went to Mexico and Central America.

6. *Assignment on Venus* by Jacobi: Story fair, swamp description good; but the part that particularly pleased me was the use of Super-sonic vibrations by the Kamali. I wish SF authors would study sonic (and supersonic) vibration experiments—from the Curies and Prof. Langevin of Paris to Prof. R. W. Wood (of Johns Hopkins U.), and on Profs. E. N. Harvey and W. Richards of Princeton, et al. Red blood corpuscles destroyed by super-sound; living germs and microbes bombarded to lifeless jelly; fish killed instantly; frogs paralyzed first and then killed, systems of communication set up through water from warship to warship, supersonic smoke killers for factories, etc.! Aye, Sonators (supersonic guns) may be used in Terra warfare before the "Jules Vernes" of SF explore the way. Hurry up, authors.

7. *"Revenge of the Vera"* by Hasse: Henry has done better; but it is SF (not fantasy) anyhow.

8. *"Phantom Out of Time"* by Bond: We gag at many Time Machine tales; but Old Smoothie Bond has given a more plausible theory than most. And thanks, N.S.B., for still another Atlantis theory. (And I beg Vizifanners pardon for dropping into an erstwhile editorial habit and using "we" when I should write "I": Really, the only one entitled to say "we" is—no, not an editor or husband—is a person who has a tapeworm.) . . . What did I ever edit? Newspapers, mostly.

I'll have to restrain myself on suggestions, wisecracks, etc., if I get the Winter issue and Vizigraph covered in three pages. Here's O-B-G Kinkade on Vol. 2, No. 5:

1. *"Crypt City of the Deathless One"* by Kuttner: If a Time Capsule is planted of SF, our great-great-grandchildren (and then some) will be reading this, with as breathless an interest as I have just done. A fine piece of work, editor, author and Vizifanners.

2. *"Conspiracy on Callisto"* by MacCreigh: Nice SF romance; but not unusually good.

3. *"Destination—Death"* by Peacock: Some fan wanted IRONIC tales. Well, here's one good short of Ironic Justice.

4. *"Blackout"* by Farrell: Well done short-short. Timely SF, too.

5. "P. S.'s Feature Flash" by Gifford: So that's the form of constructive, doodling which cartoonists do, eh? Interesting; but heck: You should see the terrible prelim sketches I do, when I'm trying to evolve a 2 x 4 painting. (Sh! No samples sent—except to relatives, and I'm rather an amateur, anyway.)

6. *"Castaways of Eros"* by Bond: As usual, a darned readable tale when it's under Bond's name! You'd find that I'm more or less of a Nelson S. Bond fan if I wrote in more often. His "hackiest" work is pretty fair. Quotes (page 84): ". . . I have always claimed that the pioneer spirit in man is not dead, nor will it ever die so long as there remain new frontiers to conquer." . . . My belief, absolutely.

7. *"The Star Guardsman"* by DePina: A future scientific civilization, triumph of oppressed "underdogs"—and all done vividly—well, it makes this an absorbing novelet.

Now for Vizigraph: The Winter issue has more quotable things in it than Fall Vizi. Quite a number of Vizifans have (inadvertently or otherwise) revealed that they have turned out fifty to three hundred thousands of words of fiction—though most have not "landed" enough tales to buy a reconditioned Ford. I think—like J. R. Gray—that NOW is the time to revamp old attempts, write new tales, try to hit the different mags with THEIR type and begin to really sell and make a "rep"—while combatage authors are away at the war. Editors, I think, pray to the Gods of Klono that you Vizifanners will do this.

Wordage does not permit the quotations from Chad Oliver (p. 118), from Alan Mannion (p. 119-120), from Leigh Brackett (p. 121, near bottom), from Wm. Conover (p. 123—his suggestion), from R. G. Anderson (p. 125, near top), from Guy Gifford (p. 126), or from Francis Elliott. I marked quotes in all those letters.

I'm telling "Opinionated-but-Good" Kinkade, and sundry others, that (hereafter) it would be well to Save Paper (the Publisher's) by writing Two Pages—instead of Three. What?

Sincerely yours,
AUGUSTUS ELLIOTT KINKADE,
The "O-but-G."

THE BEST CHARACTER!

2404 San Jacinto
Houston, Texas

HIVAH, PLANET:

I know—you don't know me—but for that matter I didn't know you till recently, so I figure I can get familiar. Analytical logic, I call it.

Don't know exactly how to go about this letter, but as I get the idea, I'm supposed to have it full of grieves, gripes, pleas and praise as the Honorable Editor says:

Everybody starts with the cover, so why should I be an exception? It was good. I liked it. But, it wasn't as good as the first copy of PLANET I picked up. The one with the black background and the girl all wrapped up in cellophane. Rozen is a guy what can draw, I say covers by Rozen from now on. Now, mind you I think Gross is good, but Rozen is better.

It seems silly to take the magazine apart like a watch, so I won't do it. That is, I won't do it

very much. The best inside picture was the one for Nelson Bond's story.

The best story is harder to pick, the two novels were both on top of the stack and Bond's story was swell. There was something about Henry Kuttner's story that didn't jive with me though, and after careful thought I would say lack of characterization was the reason. His characters weren't alive like those in *Castaway of Eros* and the *Star Guardsman*. In fact, I think Palanth was the best character I ever met in a magazine. He was a sissy, but you couldn't help liking the guy. *Star Guardsman* was a good job, a smooth piece of writing if I ever saw one. You better corral this guy Albert de Pina and don't let him get away. How about some more by the same?

I think the Vizigraph is the best reader's department I've seen in any magazine and I hope I see this in the next issue. By the way, if I drop you a card can I get an original? It sounds like a good idea, are they free or do you have to subscribe to the magazine? (Readers' vote. Ed.)

Well, I don't see how those guys manage to think up all the drivel they do to fill up three pages, two columns or what have you. I can't do it. Don't think I would if I could.

My hand's getting tired anyway, so I'll stop and wait anxiously for the next issue of "Purty Durn" good science fiction magazine, "PLANET."

Sincerely,

F. J. GIMINO.

REECE REVOLTS!

Box 557 Rt. 2,
Kannapolis, N. C.

DEAR EDITOR:

I have been reading S. F. for a good while and I have every issue of your magazine which is tops in its field. So I am not complaining about the quality of the stories or the illustrations.

I have read letters pro and con on the Cummings' argument but I have listened long enough to criticisms about one of my favorite writers, Ray Cummings. Most of the guys who call him the grand hack are, I believe, new readers of S. F. If they aren't, don't they remember "The Shadow Girl," "Brigands of the Moon," "Larrano the Conqueror," "Girl of the Golden Atom," "Man Who Mastered Time" and many others. No writer in S. F. can measure up to Cummings when you think back to what Cummings has given to his chosen field of writing. Cummings has a style of introducing a story with which I think few authors have been gifted. He doesn't wait until the story has been halfway completed before you become interested as some writers do. Also, he usually uses plots that always go toward a good story. His four best are 1, Interplanetary Stories; 2, Time Travel; 3, The atom series; 4, Robot Sagas.

I wish the people who read his stories would read carefully before they voice their opinion. Cummings has had some poor stories to his credit, but why must he be downed for a few when his classics far outrank his poor ones, which is more than I can say for some writers. Ray Cummings is, in my opinion, and quite a number of my friends, the best author in his field.

I suppose that's enough at this time so I will go on and rate your authors.

1. Ray Cummings—give us a long novel by him, and keep them coming.

2. Nelson S. Bond—more novels like his classic, "Ultimate Salient."

3. Eando Binder—more of novels like "Vassals of the Master World" and "One Thousand Miles Below."

I will rank the rest in another group as the above authors are in a class by themselves.

1. Ross Rocklynne—can always expect a good story.

2. Henry Kuttner—ditto.

3. Leigh Brackett—gives us new plots sometimes. Good.

4. Bok, Hasse, de Pina all are fair.

Your illustrations on the whole are very good. Paul, the old master, tops the list, followed in order by Leydenfrost, Morey and Hoskins. The rest are only fair.

I have only one request to make. I know Finlay is a busy man, but please try to get at least one illustration an issue from him. If you could I know you would make a lot of fans, including myself, happier.

Sincerely,

NED REECE.

R. I. P.

DEAR EDITOR:

As Nature tears loose with her annual three-dimensional October Technicolor, I feel an urge to pay another visit to Earth, and let it be known to all and sundry that Easter is in the offing, and the Winter issue of PLANET STORIES is a thing of the dear, dead past. And may I add a fervent "Thank the Lord"? For, as each issue dies in retrospect, I know that another is on the way. There's nothing like the warm glow that steals over us the day before PLANET hits the stands! A-h-h-h, me!

Y'know—it's a funny thing; as I write this, I have no idea what the Spring issue will bring. But as you read this, you and I both know what the Spring issue brought. Thereby hangs a tale! (Twenty-thousand words worth, and this is the second time I've hinted!) (What are you waiting on—an engraved invitation? Ed.)

What say we take a backward glance at the Winter issue?

The Star Guardsman (de Pina)—9.0; this took first place over the lead novel because it's a fitting sequel to *Star of Panadur*. Seems a shame, though, that war should have been brought to the peaceful Panadurs. Fate, I suppose. ("He who prepareth not against conflict, shall himself be destroyed in conflict."—Elliott)

Crypt City of the Deathless One (Kuttner)—8.2; Henry has done much, much better than this. Could it be war-nerves?

Blackout (Farrell)—8.0; nobody will agree with me on this rating, but I don't give a hoot! As far as I'm concerned, third place goes to the final listing on the contents page! Wanta start something?

Destination—Death (Peacock)—7.8; not being partial to the editor, but praising the story because it contained a novel idea, which was given novel treatment. A combination like that, I like!

Conspiracy on Callisto (MacCreigh)—7.0; nice handling of difficult characterization here.

Castaways of Eros (Bond)—5.5; we-e-ll, I dunno. Let's not mess around with covered wagons and space ships at the same time, huh?

Couldn't find any signatures on the art work this time, so I'll skip it. The cover, though, is first choice for prize—again.

Suggestion for post-war PLANETS: When a controversial subject pops up in the Vizigraph, lift it bodily out of that feature, and put it into

a place of its own. Call the new feature "PRO-CON," or something like that, and reserve it for as long as it takes any two readers to thrash it out hot and heavy . . . even if it means several issues. If a reader has a subject that would lend itself well to long and heated debate, let him voice a desire in the Vizigraph to take it up with someone—he could name his opponent if he wished, or leave it open to challenge. The editor would keep law and order, but let no holds be barred if the subject is a good one. With "PRO-CON," we'd have more space in the Vizigraph, and a new, extremely interesting feature all in one blow. What say, ye wizened Vizifanners?

Right here, I'd like to cast my vote in favor of Bill Conover's suggestion concerning "Off-Trail Yarns." That's what we've been needing for a long, long time. I can think of several stories that never saw printer's ink simply because they were just a wee bit off-trail. I'd like very much to see those stories published.

Now a bit of grist-mill stuff: Being night news editor, as well as announcer, for a radio station which originates quite a number of Network programs, it might well be imagined that typographical errors are the bane of my existence. They are just that. I note with pleasure that PLANET carries fewer of these unpardonable sins than any of its contemporaries. For that—Congratulations!

To whom it may concern—if there's any doubt about it! I have noted with a gleam in my eye that Robert Glenn Anderson, in his rating of *Star of Paradise*, says, "—Typical of Hasse." I also noted with the same gleam in the same eye that David Bellin, in his rating of *Alcatraz of the Starways*, says, "—Can always depend on Hasse." Perhaps these fellows don't know how much truth they have spoken. I'll bet they don't know just how "typical" it is, nor just what it is they "Can always depend on." But we know—don't we? Oh, brother—! For cripes sake, let's give credit where credit is due!

And with that outburst, which will probably bring down the wrath of the gods on my head, I take my leave of thee, and hie me back to the unknown reaches of Darkness.

Sincerely,

FRANCIS ELLIOTT.

MARGARET BLUSHES!

DEAR MR. PEACOCK,

Better late than never to be commenting on the Winter issue of PLANET I betcha. And before I say anything more, I wish to thank you again for that original drawing. Between my husband and myself, we have garnered a Paul, a Finlay, a Bok, a Leydenfrost, a Morey, and half a dozen fan illustrates. My husband's den is full of weird and stf magazines, dozens of which, I blush to admit, I haven't read. By the way we've garnered all the PLANET's mags so far, and expect to keep right at it. Sorry I haven't found time to write a comment on the last few issues, but between my two small sons and their bigger pest of a daddy—saying nothing of canning double amounts of vitamins, proteins and bulk and shushing the children, account of the night shift—I'm a right busy little lady. Right now, since my husband is working decent hours again, I'm pestering him to get back at writing a few stories now and then. How well I succeed you'll probably be seeing, soon.

For the leading place I'm naming Kuttner's *Crypt City*; second place goes to *Castaways of Eros*, Bond is almost always good; DePina comes in third with *Star Guardsman*, and Peacock spots into the fourth place with *Destination—Death*. Of the other two, *Blackout* is last, I still am groping around for the plot of that story. Still, in a recent issue of Collier's there was a story about some big handsome brute who drooled around for pages before he ended by trying to make everyone sore at him for no reason at all—far as I could see. Maybe my hair was braided too tight when I read this one.

Most of your stories have the human touch that is lacking in the other big magazine of science fiction. If you notice you have now been promoted to second place, and with the addition of one more feature, a short interesting article of maybe two thousand words or less about probable life in the future—space navigation problems, a woman's cooking problems on an asteroid, or the like (by Willy Ley or your competitor, Campbell)—you would possibly be tied for first place. Want to compliment you on the steady improvement of your covers and interior spreads; don't be surprised if one of these days your circulation doubles or triples. After the war, of course, I mean.

The Viz is the only department that seems to be slipping, and I hate to see that happen. A few more titles added after the letter writers' names and the Viz will read like a roster of Ku Klux Klucks' officers. The first few Hermit's and Spacesappy's were amusing and different—too many copies though, are blurring the gelatin, if you get what I mean. Also I miss the give and take of our Isaac Asenionimov and his *henchmen*. (We saw one of those serials last week, and exploding bridges, flaming warehouses and henchmen stick in my mind. Gaaah!) Tell me the truth, W. S., does Ray Cummings ever slip across a yarn under another name? If he hasn't yet why don'tcha try him once, and see what the readers say? Maybe you have already for all I know—I know I cringe when I see his name and that's two strikes before I begin. Even so a few of his stories are fine.

So much for this time; probably too much.

Sincerely,

MRS. MARGARET WELLS.

EGAD! ANOTHER POET?

DEAR EDITOR:

Oh, well!

Nothing but a poem could capture my emotions as I gaze at the latest PLANET cover.

As follows:

—Gross—

—is a total loss—

—and since you are PLANET's boss—

—I sincerely recommend that U

Promptly, Gross, out, toss.—

Trekking steadfastly into the interior, we chance upon the Vizigraph.

Alan Mannion, of course, takes first place. Second goes to the *Loon Lad* for an all around good letter. Especially the poem. Good moral, too. Incidentally, Chad's poetry inspired mine, so I think PLANET readers owe him a vote of thanks. The *Asinine One* grabs third place against some stiff opposition. And, as a special reward for an amusing letter, I hereby dedicate to him the ensuing limerick.

Springboro, Pa.

5531 Roberts Ave.
Oakland, California

"G. Waible, the *Asinine One*,
Invades PLANET, in search of some fun.
But his humor is low,
Dear editor, so,
I rename him *the Asinine Pun*."

The Gory Goon's letter was beautifully expressed and almost nabbed him third place, but there was something missing. After reading it, the editor still doesn't know what kind of stuff the Goon likes and what he doesn't like. In other words, it wasn't constructive. Just straight humor. The letter column is for honest opinions with any humor in the background. Still it was a nice letter. The climax was reached superbly.

I think he at least deserves a poem.

Something like this:

"Oh joy! Oh joy! Oh joy!
Here's to Gory, the happiness boy.
To him, anything is beautiful;
There's nothing in this world that he
finds dull.

With this blissful lad, every story's top
rate.

Why, he'd prob'ly take Cummings, and
say that he's great.

But there's just one question I'd ask to
his face;

—Confidentially, Gory, what d'you think
of fourth place?"

As for the *Nothing as Yet's* off-trail stories, I disagree reservedly. By publishing just inter-planetary yarns, PLANET has achieved a certain individuality. Also, it's the only place where time-travel-story haters can get together and hate in peace. As for fantasy, it all depends on what kind you mean. Strange conceptions of the cosmos and stuff like that is o.k., if well done, but please, no elves, magic potions, etc.

Which leads up to the stories, 5½ equaling average.

"Kuttner's Tale"—8½. Practically a classic. Just fairly good hack until the last two pages; but those last two pages. Excellent! I especially liked the paragraph on page 36, bottom column one and the three paragraphs starting on the bottom of page 36, column two. The description of the Black Forest was interesting, too, but could have been developed a little further.

Conspiracy on Callisto—2½. Some points in the story didn't seem to make sense. Maybe I got confused somewhere. Not worth rereading to find out, anyway. If it made sense to you, you can raise its score a notch. Still hack, tho.

Destination—Death—6. A short one with a neat clear plot gets me every time.

Blackout—3½. Not original. Too much like one by Binder.

Castaways of Eros—7½. Best from Bond in some time.

The Star Guardsman—4½. Expected more after *Star of Panadur*.

The art work in all was very poor this issue. Since pics are given as prizes, why not have at least one really good one each issue. Something for the fans to fight for. Not just a wild action scene, but something to hang on a wall.

The Ringers continue to ride high.

So, softly humming the haunting strains of that perennial favorite, *Paul or Nothing at All*, PLANET's favorite satellite drifts back into eclipse.

Sincerely,

DICK HETSCHEL.

PAST AND PRESENT GLORIES!

Box 131
Hoquiam, Wash.

MY DEAR MR. PEACOCK:

The first thing that strikes me about PS is its almost invisible bonds with the past glories of Science Fiction. You seem to be able to give it a continuity that rarely fails to hold up issue after issue. My one point of contention is the cover. While generally well done, the exaggeration does put it down to ordinary levels. We'll see if I can go over the Winter Issue without reverting to slapstick.

Gross has a wealth of detail in his cover. His girl—mmmm! As much as I like her, I'm afraid she would not be able to negotiate the deadly Black Forest in such a delightful costume. The Zarno, I don't recollect, had such weapons as pictured, nor was the forest made up of such spindly trees. But I liked it! I'd take the gal through the brimstone of the fiery pit itself!!

The story itself leads the issue. Hank Kuttner is one of my present-day favorites, and, despite his new occupation, I hope to see more of his delectable yarns. (Note: in this sober missive I shall give the stories by order of preference. Later on I will develop a rating system to end all rating systems!)

Old timer Bond takes second with *Castaways of Eros*. Some may think the general make-up and ending time worn, but he handled it all with his old finesse. It was a very enjoyable tale. The ending was logical and had no reason to leave one with that let-down feeling.

The Star Guardsman was a good sequel to *The Star of Panadur*. DePina I like without question, and I hope you will be able to have more of his worthy work. However, had he paid a little more attention to detail, it would have led the list for the issue. Events transpired a bit too rapidly, especially at the beginning.

Next, and this probably should have been higher in my choice, the Feature Flash. Gifford should never be left out of a single ish. This, in my estimation, tops all his efforts. Being a golfer myself, it really tickled my fancy and imagination. More such, and better, if at all possible.

Destination—Death, by your own inimitable pen, lines up next. A bit of nostalgia to me, sweeping us back to those golden days. Like the old time offerings, yet not too outdone, and handled as only you can, as you did in days of yore. More of your own shorts, please. Or how about a good novel of fifty thousand words run in a four part serial. This is one thing I would like to see in PS. Oh, I know that most of your readers say that a quarterly is no place for serials, but I think they would really go over with a bang. Ask 'em! (Still no dice. Ed.)

Conspiracy on Callisto and *Blackout* end the main features in a fair tie. The former too hackneyed, and the other, while fair, hinges on our present predicament too haphazardly.

Of course, I have saved the best for the last. To wit, our vunderful Viz. Here is material for most anything you can imagine. And the ones entered therein have imagination for most anything! Comment upon the letters, and this term itself is woefully lacking in description for what is packed within each, almost makes me want to spend more time there than with the body of the mag itself. PLANET STORIES? Oh, you mean the Vizigraph! Why, shore, I read it; Four

times a year, dammit! We could stand it four times a month! Comes war's end, Monthly? The following parenthesis are for ye Eds., comment. (None.)

My friend Chad, (L. L. L.) ((New letters of degree!)) naturally runs at the top of the list, and he certainly expresses my sentiments about Cummings. Ray is Science Fiction, no less, and radiates the ever-present background of this type of reading. Chad's the boy for me.

And Waible, who surprises me no end with his Asinine ramblings, comes a close second. I am shocked to think that someone besides myself can think in such similar terms. What a beautiful hodgepodge! (Aside; Ed., would you like one of my sprightly and batty shorts in just about the same jargon?) (No! Ed.)

Lastly, Karden, who is refreshing as he is naive. This should suffice for the Viz.

Concerning the ills, which I meant to bring up a little earlier in this offering, there is only one worth looking at twice. It is the one for *The Star Guardsman*. And it isn't the detailed work I have become accustomed to seeing in PS. What'n'ell happened? How can you do thees to us?

Ennyhoo, I'll take PLANET STORIES under any condition, unless you stop printing stories, illustrating them, remove the covers, cut out the Vizigraph, and burn up all the pulp that *should* come from around the edges.

Galactically yours,

THOMAS R. DANIEL.

THE ONLY REASON?

720 Tenth Street
Clarkston, Wash.

DEAR MR. PEACOCK:

After carefully reading the letters in your Winter '43 Vizigraph, I've come to the conclusion that there is no use my "slanting" an epistle for you folks; I can't write cleverly, and I can't quip for sour apples, so all I can do is to be myself—and probably land in Vizi's wpb. In any case, I'm an all-too-serious fan and collector, and I really enjoyed this new issue, the first PLANET I've ever bought new.

I've accepted your magazine in job lots of second hand stuff I've traded for from time to time, and I've even bought them in magazine stores if they weren't over a dime. In the course of all this, I accumulated a pretty good file (starting with Vol. I, No. 2), but they sat unread on my shelves while I avidly devoured my old Gernsback and Tremaine issues of this and that. Last week, I got another shipment of stuff and junk, and decided to see what sort of a mag was taking up my precious shelf space; my random grab brought down the Spring 1942 edition. *Star-Mouse*, *The Last Martian*, *Black Friar* . . . about the most pleasant surprise I've had since I've been a fan. I was primed for trash, and here were first-class stories with a surprisingly-large adult appeal. So, starting with the Winter '43, I shall buy PLANET regularly from the newsstand.

The only reason that we've not gotten together before is your lurid and stereotyped covers. I've been convinced that good stories just could not appear in a mag featuring such puerile and nauseating scenes, and as a result have ignored PLANET just as though it were a comic book. Let's get rid of the distressed damsels and the handsome heroes, the obvious appeal to trash-lovers. Your magazine is *not* trash by a long

shot, and in fact I think it is over the heads of 90% of the people of the type whom your covers would attract.

But this isn't getting Vol. 2, No. 5 reviewed, is it? By far the best item in the issue was Kuttner's *Crypt-City*. This yarn started out wretchedly in the best (or worst?) hack tradition. Anything to get the girl into the jungle, seemed to be Kuttner's idea; I particularly disliked the scrap with Benson and the ensuing trek into the Black Forest practically unequipped for anything. As long as they were so unequipped, how in the sacred name of Cthulhu could the party build in a matter of minutes a raft capable of carrying twelve men and a girl? Or, if we want to get particular, how could a booze-soaked wreck like Garth practically carry this whole party through such hardships? Yeah, I know, he was immune to the pollen, but so what? Immune or not, no matter what urge he might have had to see if he *did* murder his buddy, his alcohol-soaked system would have been the first to go under.

(What Kuttner should have done would have been to have worked out completely logical reactions and results, and arranged his story so as to get the party in dutch regardless of what precautions they took and in spite of everything they had in the way of superior physique, brains or what not. Only in fiction would we find an exploring party dashing off like this almost on a whim.)

After raving like this, you are probably wondering why I chose this for the first spot, aren't you? Well, in the first place, the hidden city and its alien inhabitants was very well done. The whole last third of the story packed a far more convincing atmosphere than 90% of current sf-tales. And the fact that Kuttner had the integrity to let Garth die logically, instead of making a bold escape with the gal and ending up in a cottage for two; and the fact that you had the editorial guts to print a story with such an unpulplike ending, makes this a landmark in pulp fantasy. Congratulations.

Second is Farrell's rather charming *Blackout*. This was a bit too obvious, perhaps; at least I guessed the outcome early in the story—but even so this was definitely good stuff. Your own effort comes in third; I'm a bit doubtful about the plausibility of this tale, but then—if I wanted to increase my knowledge of actual science I'd not read sf anyway. And I do believe you have a new idea in this one. Fourth was *The Star Guardsman*, a story which while well-written seemed too reminiscent of a dozen or so others.

The only two in the issue I definitely disliked were the novelets. MacCreigh merely showed the overthrow of a would-be Hitler in space, and this type of thing gags me. If there were no other reason to hope for a speedy conclusion to the war, it would be that such drip as this will presumably vanish from the pages of science fiction magazines. Bond, on the other hand, wrote capably of homesteaders and squatters—just another wild west pastoral, set in space. Fie on you, Nelson. In both these cases, it was not the way it was written that disgusted me, it was the type of stuff they were writing. But then, four good stories out of six is a very respectable average; I'm usually contented if I get two, or even one, in a single issue.

In the letters, I give Conover my #1. His suggestion of a boxed, off-trail story is magnificent, and I hope that enough demand for this hits you so that you act on it. I'm more of a fantasy

man than a space hound anyway, and my favorite stf shorts are those of Clark Ashton Smith. *Singing Flame, Visitors from Mlok, Monster of the Prophecy* . . . all the rest.

No. 2 goes to Bob Gibson for his remarks on broadmindedness and constructiveness. Orchids to you, sir, though I'm afraid you won't get far with most fans. No. 3 I must give to a pro, little as I like to (after all, these letters are amateur by rights), but Gifford's witty effort is, if anything, more enjoyable than his very excellent cartoon.

I'll be with you again in three months.

Sincerely,

FRANCIS T. LANEY.

PLANET-PACKING MAMMA!

1414 Poplar
Memphis, Tennessee

DEAR ED:

. . . the room I use for an office isn't very big, but there's room enough for me, a desk, and a chair. The sign on my door says: Theatrical producer, which means burlesque but don't mean I ain't high class. Well, I was sittin' there the other day, worried about not having an act for the spot just before the finale, when in walks this dame. She's tall, almost too tall, her hair's red like the blaze of pine knots burning in an open fire-place, her skin's golden brown. She's got the most beautiful tan I have ever laid eyes on. But it ain't the tan that catches my eye; it's the costume she's wearing. Now, I've been around quite a while and I've seen a lot of girlie costumes, so there's no excuse for me to get excited but I do, see. She wore a full red bra. Nothin' fancy, no flowers or nothin', just a plain ordinary bra, only red. Her skirt was split up the sides and was laced high on her hips. A narrow jeweled belt ran around her waist.

I was fixin' to ask her what she wanted when she spoke:

"I'm Sandra," her throaty voice informed me, and I wondered Sandra What? but I didn't ask her, see. "I work double," she said, which means she had a partner, "and the Joe that works with me wears the same costume I do, except there's nothin' up here." And she made a motion, with her hand, high on her chest. "He and I do a ritualistic dance directed to the Great God 'Oh Ya.' We heard you were looking for an act . . . so," she let the words trail off.

I started to ask her the rest of her name, but before I could say anything she slid a magazine across my desk saying: "Here, we posed for this cover." I took a look and saw *PLANET STORIES*; Winter, 1943, written on the cover. The thought struck me that the title or cover was a little misplaced. But then I'd always heard that the guys who read this Flash Gordon stuff, were nuts, so I didn't say nothin'. I told her to report to the Tribble Theatre at ten the next morning and I would watch her and her partner go thru their paces.

When she left, the magazine was still on my desk, so I decided I'd read it and see what this science fiction stuff was all about. Well, I read it and thought you might like to know what I think of it.

The burlyque character will now fade to the background while I maul this issue of *PLANET*: As you have gathered, the cover was o.k., even if it was on the wrong magazine.

Star Guardsman: The best in the issue. Illustration for same: Also the best this issue. *De-Pina* is good, only one sentence in the whole story

didn't agree with me. It was: "He kissed her with infinite tenderness and TORE himself away." How many pieces?

Blackout: Nice, timely, well done. It moves into the Number 2 spot.

Destination—Death: I especially liked the way, dear ed., you portrayed the greed and fear the gentlemen's actions were motivated by. Only sour note: why, two guys with such alien personalities ever allowed themselves to be cooped up together. Number 3.

Castaways of Eros: Bond seems to grow on a fellow. Like a war bond will in ten years. I would like to have seen a little more detail in this story. It had very little action, and yet it moved awfully fast. Number 4.

Crypt-City of the Deathless One: Some forest. Unusual ending, but a little too much of the self-sacrifice stuff. We are seeing some real self sacrifice every day on battlefields everywhere, and it comes kinda anticlimactic in a fiction story of this type. Number 5.

Conspiracy on Callisto: The only really bad story of the bunch.

The Ringer Family: Were I to rate this with the stories I think I'd put it in third place, but it is good enough to come under a heading of its own.

I won't argue about the illustrations, one I liked extra special, the others were O.K.

The Vizigraph: You're getting letters from the best letter writers in fandom. Yea, include me. Your plan of giving originals has produced the most interesting, readable letters to ye ed column in the business.

Before I forget it: the letters in 1-2-3 order are: Chad Oliver, Francis Elliott, and G. Waible. Please give this, wet from the knees up drooler, G. Waible an original . . . should we have to read another damp letter like that? And a million voices answer back, shouting: "NO!"

PLANET STORIES is all right,
I often read it late at night.

It matters not ere sober or tight,
In candle or electric light.

Win an original? I might.

(You might, at that. Ed.)

Sincerely,

ART R. SEHNERT.

STEAM-HEATED PLANET!

Freeport, Illinois
R. R. 3

DEAR EDITOR:

The time has come, as the walrus said, to speak of many things. Of cabbages and kings, and *PLANET STORIES*. First tho, let's take our medicine like a little man, shall we.

Why in the name of Jupiter and Mars must the love interest in *PLANET* always read as tho it had been lugged in by the hair of its head? In the first place, at least half of it could be left out, to the betterment of the stories it clutters up. In the second place, it is usually stuck in like it was an after thought on someone's part. Therefore, if we must have the gentler emotion, let it be woven into the story. *Alcatraz* is an excellent example of what I am speaking of. The love angle was lightly touched upon. It did not leap out and hit you in the mental eyes. Item two on the yowl parade. Why must the heroines that grace the pages of *PLANET*'s fiction be such a bunch of super glamour gals. Always intelligent, always supremely beautiful, possessing the courage of a lioness, and as lively and human as

a bunch of robots. So we'll be super women in the future. So what? To err is still human and so is emotion. I can count on five fingers the number of credible females, I have found. Well, enough for now. Now let's distribute the orchids.

I want to cast a vote for our gentle loon, Chad Oliver, for his highly amusing letter. He generally manages to combine humor with quite a bit of good sense. A rare combination in the Vizigraph as elsewhere. My second bow is for Alan Mannion's fine letter. A man who has something to say and knows how to say it. The third and final ballot is for Francis Elliott, for some well chosen remarks on the subject of Sir Cummings. My sentiments too, pal. And an honorable mention to Prentiss Carver.

Now for a glance over the contents of the latest offering. I refuse to rate the stories. Too many others can do far better in that line. But there is one story that is going down on my all time hit parade. Kuttner's *Crypt-City*. As neatly written a yarn as my weary eyes have ever rested upon. How greatly pleased I was when Kuttner refused to have his hero reformed overnight thru the power of love. Three cheers.

Star Guardsman—de Pina rather strained the seams on this story trying to explain how it happens to be a sequel to *Star of Panadur*. Outside of a little too much detail, a super-duper heroine, and a general overtone of apology breathing thru it for something, it is a nice piece of fiction. Yes, I grant you that the above is a left-handed compliment.

Castaways of Eros—One of Bond's nice shorts. Nice little plot, nice characters, nice gal. Total summing up? Nice story.

Destination—Death—Dear Sir, this hurts me as much as it does you. But the truth must be served. A standard plot nicely handled with a different twist and smoothly written.

Conspiracy on Callisto—Sorry, but I can't find much to say. It failed to click with me so why go on?

Blackout—See paragraph above.

Time out while I sharpen my claws. Will the Vizifans who have been playing the anvil chorus on Brackett's *Blue Behemoth* line up to the right. Fine, now we can snarl it out, fang to fang. If Leigh ever writes another circus yarn (preferably around the same circus) I'll get that issue if I have to pawn the fillings out of my teeth and walk to town for it. And brethren and sistren, it's a long hike to the nearest post of civilization.

The latest piece of art adorning the cover of *PLANET* simply cannot measure up to Rozen's effort for *Thralls of the Endless Night*. Gifford may want the blonde's telephone number, but I crave to know just one thing. Do the artists draw from life? Do they, huh, do they mebbe? It would give me renewed faith if I thought there really was a man like that. Be still my palpitating heart.

Well, time to start hibernating until the next issue of *PLANET* hits town. That is what I love about *PLANET* in the good ol' Winter time. It is so-o-o nice to read about the steaming swamps of Venus, and then look out at four feet of snow around your window. Then you tear your thoughts away from the deserts of Mars and start shoveling your way to civilization. Yep, *PLANET* is sure a great help in the winter time.

Sincerely,

VIRGINIA L. SHAWL.

COMPLAINT!

Post Office Box 1139
Wilson, N. C.

DEAR EDITOR:

Off-trail stuff is science-fiction's life blood—without it there is nothing but the dull round of empty trash. Any hack can turn out space-adventure, future war, future dictators, and all the other drab ideas the readers are only too familiar with; but only a writer with imagination is able to venture from the safe and stagnant waters of hackdom and formula into the uncharted and treacherous, if wholly delightful, seas of originality. Unfortunately, there seem to be only too few writers with sufficient imagination, and fewer still who dare to attempt it.

Leigh Brackett could, I think. Her ideas in *Child of the Sun*, *The Sorcerer of Rhiannon*, *Child of the Green Light*, and a few others, were refreshingly different. Her writing is improving, also—she has always been able to build an excellent atmosphere if she took pains with it.

Her chief fault, shared by most of the other writers, seems to be that of writing of humans in terms of black and white. People aren't like that: if they are, they are no longer human. People are made in grays, and half-tones, and queer combinations of good and bad emotions. They become heroes and villains (lo, these treacherous words!) by the quirks of fate, and the happenings of the circumstances that mould our human lives.

The Star Guardsman takes first place. The main motivation is old as the hills, but the little touches and inconsequential brush-strokes bring it up.

Crypt-City of the Deathless One. Paula was utterly unnecessary, and destroyed the effect of Moira, who should have dominated the story.

All the stories this time seemed to lack depth, sincerity. It is, I suppose, difficult to write with sincerity of the people and happenings of a culture created in the mind, against the terrific emotional impact of our present time. Miss Brackett did an excellent job of it in *Thralls of the Endless Night*, creating her most convincing characters to date.

I liked Rozen's cover on the Fall Issue; its bold but pleasing colors made a very good pulp cover. The Gross (No pun intended) cover on the Winter Issue gives the opposite effect. The completely indiscriminate use of color contrast makes it peculiarly repellent.

The Vizigraph is the best letter section in any science-fiction magazine—please don't cut it because of the paper shortage. First to Alan Mannion for having the temerity to write a serious letter. I agree with him entirely. Second to Ray Karden for an appealing letter and constructive criticism. Third to William (nothing as yet) Conover. Also a laurel wreath for Leigh Brackett's letter.

I'd like to register a complaint. Don't you think the nut stuff has been overdone? Humorous letters, and even a pun ("A pun is the lowest form of it . . .") occasionally; yes. But enough's enough.

Having re-read this letter, I've come to the conclusion that it is the most egotistical, dogmatic, stilted, and thoroughly nauseating mess that ever sullied the fair mail-box of *PLANET* STORIES. Ah, me . . . (Ah, us! Ed.)

Sincerely,

BANKS MEBANE.

HIS PERSPECTIVE!

409 Twelfth Street
Cloquet, Minnesota

DEAR PEACOCK:

I notice, with blushing modesty, that my letter was printed in your excellent Vizigraph. Only one complaint: In it, I make a few references to winning an original. What do you do but cut out the beautiful words I had intended to do that with! Indeed, but you should be castigated duly and properly only I haven't the inclination or time, so there, you lucky thing!

The Winter issue of PLANET is the best single issue of a science-fiction magazine yet in 1943. At its best, PLANET publishes the type of story that offers the best chance for excellence, i.e., the interplanetary class. This is because of the established standard of literary tradition already behind it, offering a support on which authors can draw on—and too often do!—in the matter of style, structure, etc. But your magazine, which should come out every issue with the modern culmination of it, rarely has anything exceptional; but this time is definitely different from that, and what a difference.

Crypt-City of the Deathless One takes an easy first. I had come to expect hack from Kuttner, but the quality of cynical irony and/or intellectual satire definitely pushed it out of that morass. The ending, reflecting the note of personal hopelessness one finds in Dos Passos on a higher scale, with the futile thoughts of the hero on his heroism forming a perfect contrast to that final jagged irony; the restrained writing and well developed atmosphere; the characterizations, little more than symbols, but excellent—all in all, a very nice job. For once Kuttner seemed to put his soul into a story.

The Star Guardsman takes the runner-up spot—nothing to be ashamed of this issue—not so much because of its entertainment qualities, but because of what the author was trying to do with it; as he explained it to me "... I venture to hope you will find in it the irony ... the intellectual appeal ... I tried to ... get past the editor ...". A fine precedent to establish, Mr. de Pina, but look at my listing of qualities I would desire in stories at the end of the ratings; it failed to entertain me as much as your combination in the hands of other authors would do. Eventually, though, you ought to get enough experience to get past this mental block.

Castaways of Eros was rather whimsical, very readable, simply Swiss Family Robinson 2200 A.D. Entertaining. At least Bond seems to be out of the habit of blood-thunder-gore-cornydialogue-melodrama, characterized by such horrible things as the one in the Fall issue—you know, Rubimor Released, Oliver Twists (squirm, squirm, squirm).

Fourth place: Peacock wrote it, some three year old child illustrated it, I read it. For once I actually cared if Horrible Headley had enough villainy in his dastardly soul to leave the hero on the Alien Planet. How neat—as Mannion would say, *I was there, I lived the scene*—one of those oxygen guzzling gillikins, of course.

CoC had an original title I haven't seen for months and months. It was well written, but it didn't say anything—unfortunately, a necessary requisite with me. The short-short goes the way of all short-shorts, and I decline to follow it.

You have a funny sense of humor, Wilbur; the fans want Paul and Finlay and Rozen, and you give them Gross. The guy's not only Gross,

he's brutal and offensive as well. . . . The rest of the artwork was just as bad.

The first requisite a tale should have to even faintly give me some amusement, is intellectual appeal subordinated to entertainment—if possible, perfectly. There are only three pulp s-f authors now writing who can do the latter. I definitely do not read s-f as my main interest, but simply as a means of escape I do not require the philosophical or psychological mastery a serious novel demands but I definitely can't, like Oliver and a few others, stand straight s-f adventure as simply that. There must be something more to keep my interest up. Intellectual appeal is that; a story, definitely, with but a few rudiments of art and still containing it attracts me far more than even well written adventure intended as nothing more.

The second is characterization. This only goes as an adjunct to the above, as an author who *can* handle IA usually can conceive of fairly believable characterization. A well developed background, of course, is only IA in most cases; but atmosphere is a trick that very few authors handle effectively, and should be judged separately.

Not very important is Mannion's "vastness." A story, developed in accordance with the above, is necessarily vast; no matter where it is set. Space, space, and more space—with a few ships buzzing around in it—is *not* vastness; it is an attempt at vastness by authors who can't handle it in any other form and must arbitrarily use it. So with that.

But Mannion is slightly off the regular lanes, as well as Brackett. Quote: "... imaginative daring . . . save the world . . . et bloocey . . ." They fall into "narrow provincial thought patterns" themselves, when they talk of spreading democracy throughout the world—I believe I read this in the best s-f story published last year—much as "abolishing cosmic rays or solar energy. . . ." Worse; if a scientist (mad, naturally) wanted to abolish solar energy, he would have to go and find out the empirical basis of solar energy, if not the complete basis of physical materialism. I see no indications of this being done yet with mass human psychology.

Another thing: They accept democracy as a semantic symbol all too wholeheartedly, with a suspicious father-complex attitude. Democracy is, as any human social organism, a very variable thing, and there are some blasphemers who would say our wonderful present system is not the complete culmination of it. For instance, many contemporary sociologists, notably Ferdinand Lundberg.

I have three and a half pages already, and I feel like perversely including twice the number so as to give you some work for your blue pencil, but only one more thing: Perspective. All too many s-f fans have absolutely none, only reading "their literature" and writing to "their magazines." Chad Oliver is probably the best example of this; he *can* distinguish good work, but he lacks that fine distinction of quality that perspective would give him, and seems slightly confused most of the time. I, for instance, if I ever find myself enjoying something that I know stinks—notably the *Captain Future* blasphemies—instantly go out and get a novel by Steinbeck, Hemingway, Galsworthy, Dos Passos, et al. It usually clears it up.

Sincerely,

RAY KARDEN,
The Rayk of the Vizigraph.

GEE WHIZ, FELLAS!!

4217 Fullerton Ave.
Chicago, Illinois

HELLO EVERYBODY:

I have finally got up nerve enough to send a second letter to P. S.!

The reason? I answered the postman's buzz one morning recently and received a surprise package. An original drawing with the compliments of Peacock in blue ink at the bottom. What a thrill. How come I rate one of those? Well, Gosh. I'm just about overcome. Pant, pant.

Before I go into the present issue of PLANET, I want to mention a few of the results of my first letter to P. S. I had no idea that I would hear from other fans when I wrote it. Well, I heard. I got letters from fans all over the U. S. I even got telephone calls here in Chi. He hung up on me when he found out I was married. Most of them wanted to know if I was married, which I am, and which I foolishly forgot to mention in that first letter. But what I want to know is, what has that got to do with the price of peanuts in Africa?

Gee Whiz. I just came out of the closet last week and I still have one arm over my head for protection.

Anyway, I came out of the meleé with one friend. Walter Kubilius, who happened to be in Chi at the time, came to see me. He came back several times. I guess he was awful lonesome. I haven't heard from him since Uncle Sam's forces absorbed him. If he should happen to read this, I'd like to say, "Greetings, Walt. How's about some fried chicken and apple pie?"

Now, I don't want to hurt any other Editor's feelings, but P. S. is still my favorite Stf. mag. *Crypt-City of the Deathless One*. An exciting tale that couldn't wait to be read.

The Star Guardsman. Almost as good. Maybe a tie there.

Destination—Death. Very good.

Blackout remains in my memory from a former reading somewhere. I haven't taken time out to run it down. Too many more important things to do.

For instance. Furthering my writing career. Yep. I sold a story at last.

The last time I wrote in to P. S. you called me a budding writer. Am I a blooming writer now? Hey! Lay off. No clubs allowed. Only fists.

Sincerely,

RUTH WASHBURN,
The Chastened.

JUST A LINE!

Route 6, Box 38
Kingsport, Tenn.

DEAR SIR:

Just a line regarding the letters of Alan Mansion and Leigh Brackett in Winter PLANET. They were very sensible and well thought out. Would like to see more like them. Best story in the issue was *The Star Guardsman* by dePina. However all that we know about comets, and we know quite a lot, indicates that a comet would have only local effects on the Earth, even if it were not burned up in the stratosphere, and as to gravitational effects, they would be nil. PLANET now has risen to a B grade. That is good. A slow improvement is desirable.

Yours truly,

THOMAS S. GARDNER.

BETTY NO LIKES VIZI!

Phoenix, Arizona

DEAR EDITOR:

JEEPERS!! Sometimes I wonder why you don't just cut out the Vizigraph section, and let it go at that . . . the letters seem to be getting worse and worse. All these self-styled geniuses, scourges, etc. Why do all your readers have to be so cute . . . or have you been wondering the same thing? Maybe you should never have offered these originals which seem to have started the whole thing. Of course, I can always stop reading said section, I know, and most of the time, frankly, I don't bother. After all, the stories are the thing. But I think everyone would enjoy the Vizi if the contributors didn't strain so laboriously to be humorous.

I haven't been reading science fiction for so very long, but have enjoyed PLANET STORIES as much as, if not more than, other similar magazines. Believe me, after reading all the trite romances in the "women's magazines," I find it very refreshing to read science fiction. Incidentally, this is my first "letter to the editor," and was evoked by my mad at those writers in the Vizigraph. However, the general thing seems to be to give personal opinion of the contents of the mag, so here goes at the Winter issue.

Wow, Kuttner is back again! What an imagination the man has! And how I did enjoy his *Crypt-City of the Deathless One*. (Gad, who titles these things?) And three cheers to Kuttner for not having Garth fall for Paula . . . that sort of thing invariably happens in yarns like this, and oh, how tired we get of it. I, unlike so many of your readers, have not devised a point system for rating the stories I like, but this was extra special on my hit parade.

Conspiracy on Callisto by MacCreigh . . . not so good; don't know just why, except that somehow to me it lacked a spark. I like that drawing, though.

Ye editor's *Destination—Death*, while being kind of repetitious throughout, really worked up to what I thought was a very interesting ending. Not being a chemist, I haven't any idea as to whether the pools of oxygen idea was practical or not, but what the heck? This IS fiction, is it not? Fair.

Ah, Bond, as usual . . . always enjoy him. But, dear God, why *Castaways*? After all, they were there by their own choice, and hardly cast away, in the finale. Good.

Since I didn't read the first Europa story of Hasse and dePina, *The Star Guardsman* was all new material to me. But, happily, dePina didn't make this yarn dependent on the previous one for clarity. Details very interesting, I thought. In fact, thoroughly enjoyable.

Oh, my, I forgot to comment on the cover. This will never do. Candidly, I don't get the point of it, but it's quite interesting, anyway. I wonder if all girls wandering through jungles of one kind and another are so scantily attired? Good drawing, though. I trust it was supposed to illustrate Kuttner's story . . . if not, my apologies for the jungle crack.

Again, I like the magazine, aside from the Vizigraph, and am always glad when it appears (alas, too infrequently) on the newsstands, as I know I will open to bigger and better adventure.

Sincerely,

BETTY HUGHES.

GLAMOROUS LEIGH!

Del Monte Hotel,
Los Angeles, Cal.

DEAR EDITOR:

I'm honored, I'm floored, I'm overwhelmed! Even if I was practically called a "fifth columnist," it is an honor to be noticed by la Brackett.

Tell her however, that her *Thralls of the Endless Night* (who was responsible for that title?) was warm, and human and absorbing. I like to think of Leigh as someone glamorous, someone to be taken to a fabulous Hollywood spot with a great corsage of white orchids, and be handled as one would handle something exquisite and fragile. AND I want to find all this in her stories. Let the *unglamorous* males of SF do the gory stuff—but not her! Still, I'm sorry if I was kinda rough, eh Leigh?

Via the well-known underground, got my copy of PLANET before it showed up on the stands. Nasty cover. If the poor heroine wore that there costume through the jungle depicted by Hank, I couldn't blame the plants for being carnivorous! For the Understatement Department: *Crypt-City of the Deathless One*, was slightly improved adventure, poor characterization, monotonous dialogue. What, may I ask, is the idea of using "On the Beam" and "Okay," and a lot of other expressions peculiar to our present day in a story of the future? I can only rate it at fourth place with an 8.09.

Your own short story took second honors with a brief but well-handled plot. The liquid oxygen idea was a novel bit, and I for one found it sufficiently well written and enjoyable to give it a 9.05, hope you will lean over to the scientific side Wilbur and tone down the "adventure" stuff—it's becoming passe in STF.

As usual, Albert dePina took top honors with a fascinating novel as smoothly written as anything I've seen in a long time with *The Star Guardsman*. His skill in characterization and dialogue cannot be matched by any other writer of science-fiction outside of C. L. Moore, which is the best compliment I can pay him.

The Star Guardsman was so outstanding that we are using it as a special study in our science-fiction class, to illustrate how suspense and dramatic action can be achieved without the use of actual physical combat. Tell Mr. dePina, wherever he may be, that it seems as if each of his succeeding stories is even better than the preceding ones. The character of the heroine was something to rave about, and Palanth, the Martian dandy, is a character that deserves to have a story written about him. As a sequel to *Star of Panadur* it is superb, something most sequels are not.

IDLE SPECULATION DEPT. Wonder where the "Council" will go from Venus, and what will happen to it wherever they do go? Hope the Sarge writes another story on this theme. The door is left wide open for a "follow up!"

Many thanks to Alan Mannion for his reference to my letter. And boyohboy do I agree with Mr. Conover about OFF-TRAIL stories. I think that's the grandest idea that has been submitted as yet, outside of Gifford's priceless cartoons. How about Sergeant dePina doing that off-trail yarn—nobody writes about the future as vividly as he. I think yagot something there! Congrats on *Prey of the Space Falcon* Bud, a little too much ACTION, but took Top honors on that ish—in fact, 'twas a walk-away

for you. Liked immensely the "food" angle. That's what we need for PLANET, new ideas, new, fresh and original plots, crisp clever dialogue, stories that have scope and meaning, not the old, worn out conflict between hero, villain and heroine. All in all the Winter vol. is very good, especially with dePina's marvelous novel.

With best wishes,

GONZALO ELOSEGUI.

MY, WOTTA BIG PURSE!

5 Wahtah Court
Portsmouth, Va.

DEAR EDITOR:

Your friendly invitation in the Vizigraph gave me the necessary courage to write. You did say that this is OUR department and may use it for either the sublime or the ridiculous—here's the "ridiculous" Mr. Editor, my first offense.

I am also a new addition to the PLANET family—not having read anything deeper than Dialogues of Plato or True Romances. Seriously, I like this planet stuff—I never dreamed there were so many thrills and excitement in one magazine. You see, Mr. Editor, I had noticed the name of the magazine, but those loud covers and rough paper didn't appeal to me—had to have a soothing, sedate cover before I could be interested in making a purchase. But I am indeed sorry for that bad bit of judgment for I've probably missed out on a lot of fine stories—but from now on—covers or no covers, I'll buy and read your magazine religiously.

It happened this way—my reading a PLANET for the first time—I had left my home to purchase one of those Romance stories (silly, but I like them), they were out of them—I turned to one of those racks—the colors were screaming—something like firecrackers on Independence Day—gosh it was awful—I turned, looked around, to see if anyone was looking, then I surreptitiously grabbed the loudest one from the rack—slipped it in my purse—gave the man two thin dimes and hurriedly walked out of the place.

It's a good thing, Mr. Editor, that I have the bad habit of beginning at the end of magazines and reading forward, or I would have probably gotten pretty much discouraged, for your first listed story *Crypt-City of the Deathless One* didn't appeal to me at all—nor did the illustration pertaining to it. Why it was merely a glorified jungle story—I expected Tarzan to leap over my chandelier from within the covers—why on earth does anyone write a story like that for a PLANET magazine?

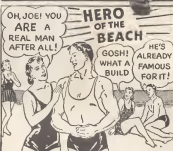
I liked *Destination—Death* very much and enjoyed it immensely, but it could have been just a wee bit longer. The *Blackout* story was excellent, but—the one I liked the most of all was *The Star Guardsman*, it was superb and impressive. The arrangement, the characterization and the splendid developments and surprises caused me to be a bundle of nerves—the suspense was so intense—that I was glad when I had reached the end of the story. After I had an opportunity to relax and think it over, I was sorry it had ended—I wanted more. This man "Palanth"—wasn't he wonderful—Ahl if he were real . . . if there are any like him on other planets—I'm on my way there. Tell this Mr. dePina to give us more of Palanth—beg him, bribe him—or anything you like—pleaseeee!

Sincerely,

MARA BALDWIN.

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